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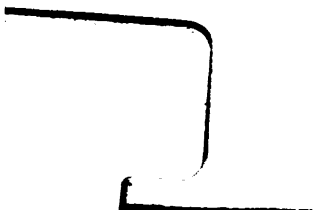
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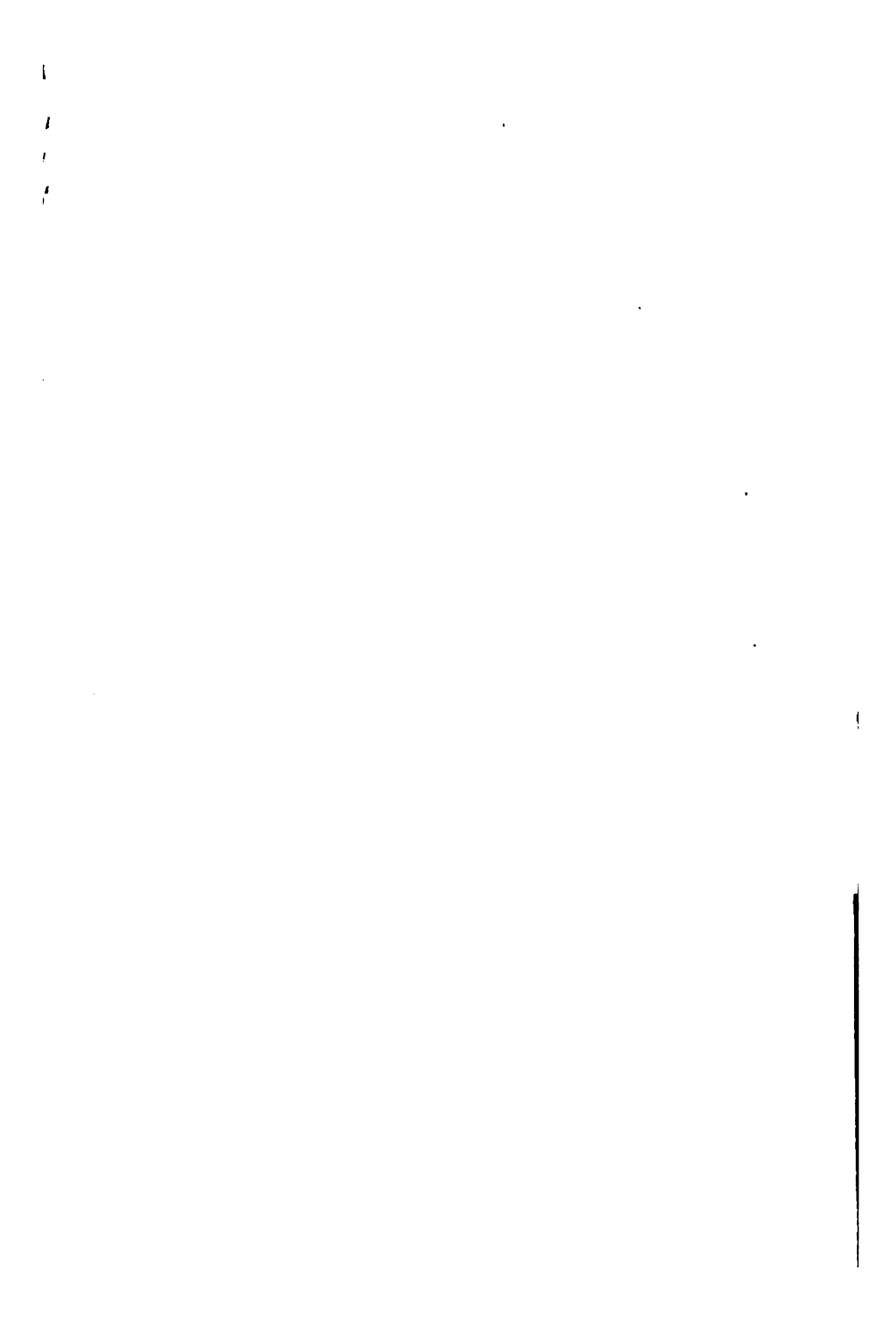


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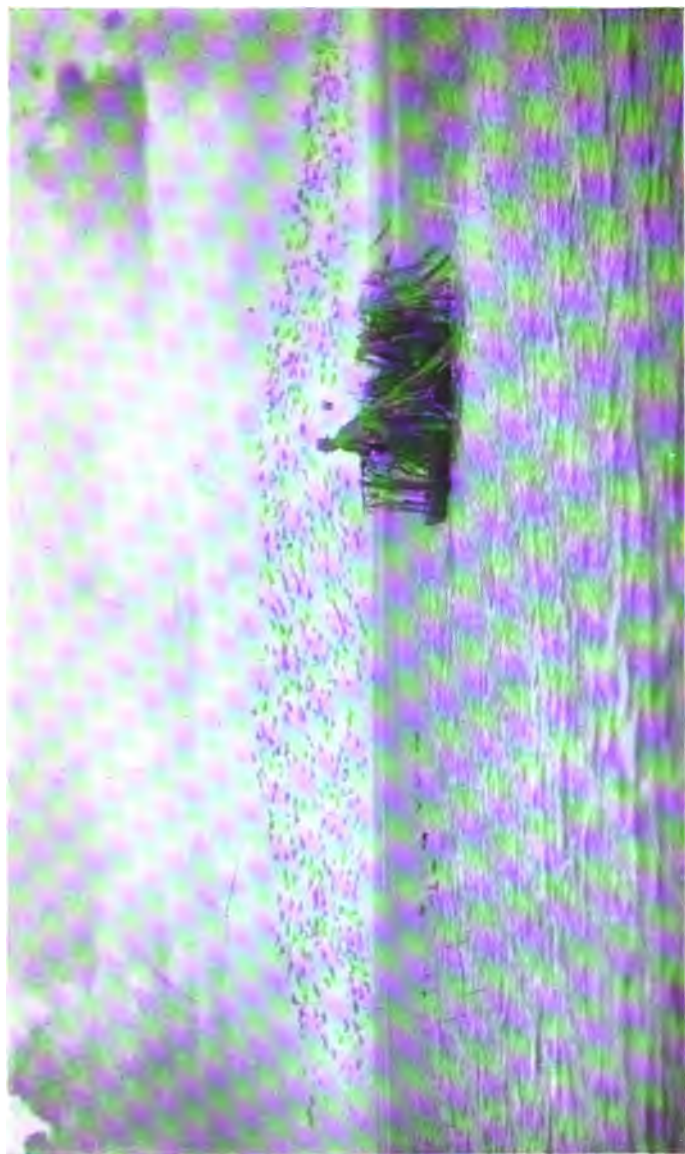
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THE BLUE GOOSE CHASE

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"THE WHOLE FLOCK AROSE WITH A ROAR OF WINGS." PAGE 125.

(From actual photographs. The first life picture of blue geese.)

THE BLUE GOOSE CHASE

Camera-Hunting Adventure in the Adirondacks

BY

HERBERT K. JOB

Ornithologist of Connecticut. Author of "The Sparrow
Bird-Study," "Violet Wings," "Among the Water-
Fowl," "How to Study Birds," etc.

*ILLUSTRATIONS BY THE AUTHOR
AND
WILLIAM F. TAYLOR*

NEW YORK
THE BAKER & TAYLOR COMPANY

1911

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A Camera-Hunting Adventure in Louisiana

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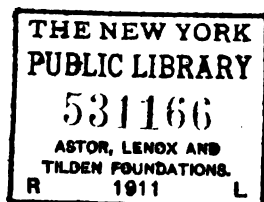
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NEW YORK
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1911



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TO MY BROTHER
ROBERT JOB
MY BOYHOOD CHUM

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PREFATORY NOTE

I have written this story for the express purpose of interesting boys in hunting with the camera, showing that this can be made a manly and exciting sport. The boy characters are drawn from real boys. The route of the journey and most of its incidents are taken from an actual trip, with the addition of a few episodes characteristic of that section of the country. The habits and occurrences of the birds described are from my own observations, as are the descriptions of the country and its inhabitants. The hints about camera methods are of necessity brief, but those who are interested to try this camera hunting can find complete directions in another book of mine,—"How to Study Birds." The main theme of the story, the re-discovery of the winter habitat of the blue geese, was an actual achievement. Photographs of these geese and of the other kinds of birds mentioned were actually secured. It was, however, deemed advisable to have an artist introduce into some of the illustrations the activities of the boys, to give added interest for boy readers.

In short, I have tried to write a boys' story which

PREFATORY NOTE

on the one hand should be interesting and make the readers want to try the camera, and at the same time be accurately instructive and true to Nature.

HERBERT K. JOB,
State Ornithologist of Connecticut.

West Haven, Connecticut,
March 1, 1911.

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The Blue Goose Chase

CHAPTER I

EARNING A HUNT

“**H**OORAY, Jim, come on, I’ve found it!” shouted Ned from away up in the woods on the steep rocky slope. “A broad-winged hawk’s nest!”

“Where are you?” called Jim.

“Follow up the brook, and you’ll see me at the top of the ravine, to the left,” was the answer.

The two boys were out with their cameras, exploring a big tract of very wild forest on the side of a mountain after hawks’ nest pictures. This piece of woods seemed a particularly likely place. In fact, a farmer down in the valley had told them that he often saw hawks flying in that direction.

When Jim had scrambled up to where Ned directed, he found him sitting on a rock, looking pretty well pleased with himself. It was not necessary to have the find pointed out. Jim saw it as soon as he came in sight of it. Up in a crotch of a fine large straight chestnut tree, about fifty feet

from the ground, was a rough, rather large platform of sticks. Bits of white down clung to it and to the twigs all about. One of the old birds was flying about in circles just above the tops of the trees, and the other was perched up in an oak near by. Both were making shrill, mournful whistling cries,—“whee-e, whee-e-e.”

“Good work, Ned,” said Jim, slapping him on the back as he sat down beside him on the rock to take in the view and get his breath. “Say, but that’ll make a corking picture! I’ll bet it’ll be a prize-winner, too. You can work it finely from that chestnut. It doesn’t look to be over five feet from crotch to crotch.”

“That’s so,” replied Ned, “and what I was just thinking about was how lucky it is that those lumbermen haven’t quite got here yet. You noticed, down the hill, how they were cutting out these big chestnut trees for railway ties. This is a regular old ‘tie tree,’ and they’ll surely cut it in the fall when they start in again. Anyhow, we got in first.”

The two young hawks up in the tree now began to act as if they took some interest in the conversation. At first they were alarmed by the shouting, and did what young hawks generally do under those circumstances, lay down flat in the nest and kept perfectly still. Now they were getting over their bashfulness and were standing on the edge of the nest, looking down curiously at the boys. They

were pretty well feathered, except that their heads were still white and woolly, as the rest of their bodies had been not long before.

"Yes," resumed Ned, "they'll make a dandy subject, and it certainly ought to pinch that prize."

One could not be long with the boys without discovering that a certain prize filled a very large place in their thoughts. The way of it was this. Ned's father was an enthusiastic out-of-door man, and very keen on hunting wild game with the camera. He wanted his son to become a skilled camera sportsman. It happened that a leading magazine was offering each month a series of prizes, to boys and girls under eighteen years of age, for the best pictures of wild birds or animals, taken by themselves without assistance. The first prize was a gold badge and five dollars. Ned's father had told him that, if he would win it, he would take him on a camera-hunting expedition away off in some wild and distant place where he would have fine chances at rare wild game. In that case Jim would go too. Jim was not exactly a member of the family, but he was pretty nearly a candidate for adoption, because Ned and he were chums and did about all their hunting together, so it would have been hard to separate them. So it was understood that if Ned ever salted down that gold badge and took the trip, Jim was to go too. Already Ned had secured "honorable mentions" and had taken some of the lesser prizes.

Now he was on the war-path to be *first*,— and that is what every boy of spirit intends to do, to get there, with both feet!

“Well, now,” announced Ned, “I’m all ready for my aeroplane,” and forthwith he proceeded to buckle on the climbing-irons, which he had bought from a telephone supply company, the same kind as the linemen use for climbing the poles.

“You want to be pretty careful up there,” said Jim, who, though by no means a coward, had a well-developed bump of caution, “because there’s precious little to hold on to, and while you’re working you might forget. If you fell from there you’d never do any more hunting with the camera.”

“Trust me for that,” replied Ned; “I’m not afraid, but whenever I’m up in those big trees I never take any chances.”

With climbers on, the tree-bolt, clamp, and focus-cloth in his pocket, and the leather case holding the camera and plates slung over his shoulder by a strap, Ned spiked his way up the tree. When he reached the crotch opposite the nest, he broke off a small branch and used the stub that was left for a hook, hanging up the case by the handle. Taking off the strap, he put it around the tree and also around his body under the arms. “There now,” he called down to Jim, who was attentively watching, “I’m safe enough for awhile!”

The young hawks were standing up in the nest,

looking curiously at this arrival, a new animal to them. They were not going to make friends with him, though, and were ready to strike out with their strong sharp talons. But Ned was not bothering about what they thought of him. He had enough to do to screw the camera to the trunk and get a good focus.

When this was done he broke off a sprout, and with this he could reach the birds and make them change their positions as he desired, to get them to look their prettiest. They stood quietly, so he was able to make time-exposures. Waiting till clouds passed over the sun, to soften the light, he took several pictures. The whole scene made a very charming study,—the queer young hawks between the big forks of the tree, with the bower of leaves just over them. He took plenty of time, trying hard to make no blunder, and to get the very best picture that was possible. Then he packed up his outfit, undid the strap, and spiked his way carefully down.

There was no more hunting for the boys that day. Their one thought now was to see how the pictures would come out. So they hustled to Ned's home, a three-mile walk. When they arrived no time was lost in shutting themselves in the photographic dark room which they had boarded off in a corner of the cellar. This was ever so much better than sending the plates to a photographer and wait-

ing several days to know the result. Besides, it is part of the game to do the whole thing oneself, and no end of fun.

Taking the first plate from the holder, Ned placed it in a tray, where it was hardly visible in the dim ruby light, and poured the developer over it. In less than a minute parts of it began to darken, and the boys could see the negative image grow stronger and stronger and become a clear, brilliant picture, in which the young hawks showed up splendidly. The boys were so delighted that the dark room was hardly big enough to hold them, for their capers. Each one of the plates developed up so well that there was little to choose between them.

Next day, when the plates had been fixed, washed and dried, Ned made some prints. Choosing the very best of them, he trimmed it, mounted it on a card with great care, and mailed it to the magazine.

The hardest part of all was the long wait which must follow. It was now the last week of June, just after school had closed. The decision would not be known for several months, and would be first announced in the magazine, when the pictures winning prizes would be published. About a week later the prizes would be mailed to the fortunate ones.

The boys had hoped that the September issue might give the result, but they were disappointed. It seemed an age before the October number came

out. When at last Ned got hold of it he tore off the wrapper like mad, and raced through the pages. Suddenly he began to yell like a wild Indian,—“I’ve got it, I’ve got it! First Prize, gold badge, scooped the whole business, rah-rah-rah, wow, wow, wow!” This was only the beginning of Ned’s flow of oratory and fireworks, but we must boil it down, not because it was not fit to print, but because there was no stenographer handy to take it down. And even if there had been, probably no expert alive could have worked fast enough to catch it all. The next move was a dive for the telephone to call up Jim and tell him the good news. Of course, everyone in the house, and in the whole neighborhood, soon knew all about it.

When Ned’s father came home he was overwhelmed with such a whirl of wild embraces and war dances that he almost thought he saw stars. “Now, Dad,” cried the hilarious kid, “you’re in for it, you can’t get out of it now, you’ve got to take me off somewhere. I say let’s start to-morrow for Africa, or the North Pole, or some staving old place. Get busy, Dad, get busy!”

“Well, well,” said Dad, when he finally got loose again and had recovered a little from the onslaught, “first of all I want to see that wonderful prize.”

“It’ll come inside of a week,” said Ned, “and meanwhile you can be thinking what you’re going to do about it, for I’ll want an answer right off. If

you don't tell me I'll lie awake every night thinking about it."

This was Saturday, and on the following Thursday an important-looking registered letter arrived, the envelope bearing the name of the magazine. It was the most exciting missive Ned had ever opened. In it was a neat little card of congratulation from the department editor, with the gold badge pinned on one corner. Accompanying it was another piece of paper which was not without importance, a check for five dollars.

It was a proud and happy moment when Ned showed the letter to his father. Dad was just as much delighted as the prize-winner himself. He gave his boy a regular bear-hug and shook his hand warmly, saying, "You have proved yourself a good sportsman, Ned. I'm proud of you, and congratulate you with all my heart."

But Ned was after something besides congratulations, pleasant as these were. Looking at his father knowingly, he remarked,—“Well, Dad, what are you going to do about it?”

“Oho!” replied Dad, “I didn’t know but that you would be so pleased with the prize that you would forget about that other little matter. But, seeing you haven’t, we’ll have to fix that up, I suppose. I haven’t time just now to talk about it, but I’ll do it to-night. Suppose you invite Jim over, and I’ll have a proposition to make to you both.”

CHAPTER II

THE BLUE GOOSE CHASE PROPOSED

THAT cool September evening the family clan, including Jim, got together around the open fire for a pow-wow, at which Dad, the chief, presided. "Boys," said he, "you've just got back to school after a long vacation. It must seem *so* nice to get to work again that of course you wouldn't want to tear yourselves away for a long time. I suppose next summer'll be time enough for our trip, won't it?"

At this the boys' faces grew suddenly very sober. "O Dad," pleaded Ned, "*don't* make us wait all that time! You might almost as well say wait till I've grown up. We just *can't* wait so long. Do please go soon. Couldn't we go somewhere this fall?"

"But how about your football team?" asked Dad. "You surely wouldn't want to miss that, and leave the fellows in the lurch."

"Well, no," assented Ned, "that wouldn't quite do, but you know football is over by Thanksgiving. Couldn't we go somewhere for the Christmas holidays?"

"I was thinking of that," said Dad, "and now I'll tell you boys something. Perhaps I never mentioned it to you, but there's a hunt that for a long time I've been very anxious to make. It'll take some little time to explain it clearly, but I'll do so if you'll be patient listeners."

The boys were only too willing to hear, so Dad went on. "I suppose," he said, "you boys are both interested in wild geese?"

"You can just bet we are!" exclaimed Ned.

"All right, then," said Dad, "I'll tell you a goose story. Of course you know that the wild geese which we see here in spring and fall flying high up overhead, in V-shaped flocks, are called Canada geese. But there are some other kinds, too. I wonder if you boys could tell me the name of any of them?"

"The only other kind I ever saw," said Ned, "was the brant, when we were down at Monomoy Point, Cape Cod, that Easter vacation, and saw those big flocks of them."

"Isn't there a white goose, too?" asked Jim.

"Well, I never!" mocked Ned. "You must be a goose yourself if you haven't learned yet that white geese are tame ones."

"No, no!" exclaimed Jim. "I mean *wild* geese that are white. I was reading somewhere about the great flocks of them that they see out in California."

"Jim is right," said Dad, "that's the kind known as the snow goose. It's pure white, except that the outer part of the wings is black. I've seen them myself in the West and South, but here in the East they're very rare indeed. They are one of the kinds of geese I'm going to tell you about. But first of all, Ned, go to the library and bring me out Volume Six of Audubon's 'Birds of America.'"

"Now," said Dad, when Ned returned with it, "look up the snow goose for me."

When Ned had found it, Dad showed the boys the colored plate which figured both adult and young.

"I want you to notice," said he, "this bird which Audubon called the young or immature snow goose in its first winter plumage. You see it has a white head and neck, with a dark gray body, and lighter gray wings. Well, let me tell you that this is not the snow goose at all, but an entirely different kind now known as the *blue* goose, called so because it is mostly bluish-gray."

"Why," said Jim, "I thought Audubon was a very learned man. How could he make such a blunder as that?"

"He was one of the greatest naturalists in the world," replied Dad. "But in his day they had few books about birds, and no railroads, so people couldn't travel as they do now. In these days we can go away up to northern Alaska without much trouble. But Audubon never got further than to

what is now North Dakota and eastern Montana, and that was a long, hard steamboat trip up the Missouri River, with danger all the time of being killed and scalped by hostile Indians. So he knew little or nothing about many birds that are familiar to us to-day."

"I just wish," exclaimed Ned, "that we could get away up into that north country and hunt out some more of those rare things!"

"Perhaps we can some day," replied Dad, "if you grow up hardy and strong, and prove yourself a good scientist. But I want to tell you more about this blue goose. It is now thought to be a scarce bird everywhere. But Audubon, in this book, tells that he found the *young* snow geese very abundant around the mouths of the Mississippi River. It's a very wild region down there, and modern ornithologists don't seem to have explored it. But *hunters* go there, and I've heard through them what enormous numbers of wild geese stay there during the winter.

"Say, Dad," cried Ned excitedly, "wouldn't that be just a dandy place to go! Why couldn't we go down there?"

"Now, don't be in such a hurry," said Dad; "just wait till I get through talking, and you'll find out all the sooner what I have in mind. These hunters say that most of the geese are 'brant,' and have the head and neck white."

"Well, boys, what I am driving at is this. I'm very strongly of the opinion that a great many of those geese will prove to be the blue goose, which is supposed to be so rare. That may prove to be the one place in all the world where this goose is common, where nearly all the blue geese on earth stay for the winter, before they leave to migrate away up in the unknown wilds by the polar sea to breed. It would be a great feather in anyone's cap to *re-discover* the blue goose. Of course no living man has ever taken photographs of them, and to do that would also be a great stunt. You can easily see what a splendid hunt and adventure that would be to light out some fine day for the wilds of lower Louisiana, on a very uncommon sort of a wild goose chase. I've wanted to do this for a long time, ever since I began to look up this matter of the blue goose."

The boys all through this recital had been paying good attention, but now they were listening for their lives, their eyes looking like saucers. As Dad approached the climax of his discourse, their excitement grew till it was positively painful.

"It happens," continued Dad, smiling at their evident suspense, "that I have a friend in Louisiana, a member of the State Fish and Game Commission. He has been writing to me, telling of the wonderful amount of wild game in that country, and wants me to come down and hunt it with the camera.

"That's all right, Ned," said Dad, "and it makes me think of another thing I want to tell you boys. You don't want to think that because you are going south to a warmer climate everything will be dead easy. It won't be, not by a long shot. It's a wild country down there, miles and miles of marsh and swamp, almost impassable, with no inhabitants but wild birds and animals. It won't always be warm, either. Sometimes it is very cold and disagreeable. They have very wild 'northerners,' when it gets wet and rough, and even our lives may be in danger."

"Ki-yi!" shouted Ned, "that's the stuff, that's what we fellows want, no mollycoddling for us! Isn't that right, Jim?"

Jim agreed and Dad went on. "I want you boys," he said, "when you go down there to be in prime condition, so you won't get sick or tired out. I don't want to be handicapped by any invalids or cripples. Of course your football is good training in some ways, if you don't get lamed up and have to stay at home."

The boys glanced at one another rather solemnly, for they would rather never see a football again than to get knocked out of an expedition like this.

"But," he went on, "I think hunting and tramping and cross-country runs will make the best sort of training, so I want you to do a lot of field-work this fall, and get all your muscles as hard as rocks. Will you?"

The boys agreed to go into training. So it was all settled that they were to make the trip, starting about the middle of December. Ned's father wrote to his friend, accepting his kind offer. During the fall the boys worked hard, and had the satisfaction of feeling that they were getting into the pink of athletic condition, fit for anything that might come along.

Meanwhile, especially as the time drew near, they were absorbed in their preparations for the journey. The getting ready was not as formidable a matter as though it were for a camping trip. Food and shelter and bedding would be provided for on the boats. The only things to bother about were clothing and the camera-hunting outfit.

The first was easy. Aside from what each wore on the journey, two suits of old clothes, changes of underwear of heavy and medium weight, flannel shirts, hunting cap, extra shoes, long rubber boots, were the principal articles.

The camera outfit was as follows. Since the boys worked together in partnership, it saved a lot of trouble, expense, and lugging, requiring one half what it would have done for each to have a separate outfit. Between them they used two cameras. One of these was the ordinary long-focus kind, for general work, in trees, and so on. The other was a reflex, or reflecting camera, for very rapid snapshot work on flying birds, and such like. Both

were of the 4x5-inch size, and took the same double plate-holders. They used glass plates, which are faster and cheaper than films, though heavier, and decided to take on this trip twenty boxes, a dozen plates to each box, which would average over a box a day for the days they would probably have the chance to use them. Ned's father used a good many more.

All was ready, everything packed in good order. Then came the hardest chore of all,—to wait.

CHAPTER III

ON TO "THE PASS"

NO more exciting thing could have happened than the arrival of the great day. Not even to have been killed or had the roof burn over their heads would have been any more exciting to the eager boys than actually to start off on this expedition to southern wilds. For the past two months and a half the thought of it had hardly been out of their heads. Even when they studied their lessons, there was always a map of Louisiana, dimly visible, hung up on the background of their minds.

It was a clear, bracing, frosty morning, that eleventh of December. "Isn't this just great, Dad!" called Ned, as soon as he had opened his almost sleepless eyes very early. "It's just the best day that ever was. Anyhow, I feel that way."

The baggage had been checked on ahead the day before, so the cheerful party of three started off light in spirits and luggage. Taking a morning train from their Connecticut town, they reached New York with plenty of time for various errands. When their train, the 4.25 P. M., pulled out from Jersey City, on the Pennsylvania Railroad, via the

Southern, they were comfortably settled in the Pullman sleeper.

At dinner in the dining car, as the train sped along near Philadelphia, the boys pitched in so heartily that for a time it looked as though the supplies must surely run short. Fortunately their appetites subsided, so the other passengers that came in later did not have to go hungry.

When they left home that morning, there was a little snow on the ground. By the time they reached southern New Jersey the last trace had disappeared. But now, down in Maryland, it was actually snowing again, when they turned in early in the neat berths, which felt wonderfully comfortable after the early rising and the excitement of the day. The morning light found them well down in Virginia. It was not snowing now, but even so far south there was a layer of snow on the ground.

"Well, well!" exclaimed Ned, "I thought it would look different from this in the South."

"What did you expect to see?" inquired Dad.

"Why," said Ned, "I thought there would be palm trees, with everything green just like summer."

"Oh, no," said Dad, "you will have to go clear down to central Florida to find anything like that, and even there some of the trees would be bare. Virginia isn't very far south. They have pretty stiff winter weather sometimes. But people do get the idea that it's always warm there. The keeper

of the life-saving station at Cobb's Island, Va., told me of a man from Chicago who had a house built on another island near, so he could come to a warm climate for a while each winter and escape the cold. When it was finished the family arrived, a little before Christmas. They had hardly got settled before it came on a terrible gale and blizzard. Everything was snowed in and frozen up, and they were prisoners for nearly a week. They were so surprised and disgusted that they put back for Chicago, and never stuck their noses in there again."

By the middle of the morning the last trace of snow had disappeared. It was a great day for the boys. The sun was now warm, and a good share of the time they sat on the platform of the observation car, at the rear end of the train. After leaving Virginia, they had North Carolina to study, from that best of geographies, the real thing. Then they cut across the western edge of South Carolina, and put in the remainder of the day "marching through Georgia." All this country was a good deal alike, mostly level and sandy, with frequent tracts of the regular southern pines which had branches only away up near the top. Often they passed fields where cotton had been grown, but which were now bare and dreary, with an occasional dried-up cotton plant and its white boll, which had been left standing. The little negro cabins were interesting. Almost always a cluster of black woolly heads, of all

sizes, would gather at the front door, to see the train go by. The water in the rivers and streams looked very dirty, either yellow or red, from the clay soil which washes down into them. Most of the towns seemed to the boys rather forlorn, but now and then they came to one which had splendid large cotton mills and nice residences.

"They're having a great business boom in some parts of the South," Dad told them, "and things are getting to be very different from what they were."

During the afternoon they enjoyed seeing the famous Georgia peach orchards, about which they had heard so much, and they were sorry enough when the darkness shut down.

The train on which they were was the through flier to New Orleans, which city would be their starting-point for the principal explorations. Before this, however, they had planned to stop on the coast of Mississippi, and take a little cruise out into the Gulf of Mexico to an island which the wild geese were said to frequent. They were to get off at Pass Christian, where Dad was acquainted, early next morning.

After racing all night through Alabama, by the first gray light the boys could see that they were in a pine-timbered country, perfectly level, with miles and miles of pine-woods, on both sides of the track. About seven o'clock the train stopped specially for them at "the Pass," as it is there called. The game-

warden, who was to take them out, was at the station to welcome them, a big, strong man, who, the boys soon found, was jolly company. The baggage was sent to his house by cart, while the party walked through pleasant streets bordered mostly by green live-oak trees streaming with the gray southern moss, while occasionally there were the strange-looking palmettos. Now it began to look more as the boys had thought the South would be like.

After a good hearty breakfast, the new arrivals all had a chance to unpack and get into their hunting clothes. Though it was not nearly as cold as up in New England, there had been a "norther" blowing for the last few days, and the air was unusually cool for that latitude. By night it would get pretty chilly, and in the early morning there might even be frost. So they decided to wear their corduroy suits and keep on their winter flannels.

The plan was, before starting for the island, to spend a day here at "the Pass" and have a good long tramp and hunt through this pine timbered region. Dad wanted the boys to know something of this sort of country, of which there is so much in the South, and also to see what sort of condition they were in for the work which was to follow. It did not take long to get the cameras in commission. Ned carried the "reflex," for snapshots at birds or other game, while Jim took the ordinary camera for pictures of the scenery. The three went along to-

gether, and they were soon seeing the winter birds of that part of the country. A good many of them were the old familiar friends which had migrated from the North to escape the cold, such as the blue-bird, bluejay, phœbe, flicker, various sparrows, the merry little house wren, now silent, but lively as ever, and the robin in flocks.

"Poor robin," said Dad, "it gets shot a good deal down here as a game-bird, and it's a wonder that there're as many left as there are."

"That's too bad," exclaimed Jim; "people oughtn't to shoot such a useful bird, that eats so many grubs and insects."

"The trouble is," Dad explained, "that even so far south there aren't enough worms and grubs during the winter for them to live on, so the flocks feed on what berries and fruits are left over, and people say the robins do *them* no good. But they find a good many eggs and torpid insects, and they oughtn't to be killed."

Beside these familiar birds there were some southern species that were new to the boys. In many of the gardens in town they saw a gray bird with a long tail and white wing-bars, which they were told was the famous mockingbird. Another fine bird was the brilliant cardinal, all red, with a top knot. Out from the town they saw a logger-head shrike, or southern butcher-bird, standing patiently on top of a bush out in the field, waiting

for a mouse to come out. Ned tried to get near for a picture, but it flew away. Another striking bird was the red-bellied woodpecker, and also the queer little brown-headed nuthatch that ran up and down the pines.

But even more strange and interesting to them were the buzzards, great black fellows that soared and circled overhead, hardly moving their wings. "It looks dead easy to fly," remarked Ned, as he watched one of them floating so airily in the sky. "I believe they're too lazy to flap their wings, and that's why they soar so much."

"I think they get too lazy even to do that," said Jim. "Just look at those lazy louts." He pointed to where a whole row of them had collected on the roof of a building, near the edge of town.

"Hold on," exclaimed Ned excitedly, "I didn't see those fellows! Maybe I can get a shot at them."

The buzzards sat still while he walked quietly along, pretending not to see them. When he was opposite them he suddenly stopped, turned towards them, and took his snapshot before they knew what he was up to. As soon, however, as they saw he was watching them, they reluctantly spread their wings and flapped off.

"I think," said Dad, "judging from the direction they fly, that they're going to the slaughter pens. That is a great place for them, and you'd be interested to see what they do there. They're useful

scavengers, and are protected by law all over the South."

The boys were more than willing to follow the suggestion. As they came near the low buildings and pens, they saw that they were fairly black with buzzards, some of them evidently gorged, because they sat with drooping wings. Just then the door of a shed opened, and a man threw out a basketful of entrails and waste meat. Then there was a change in the sedate buzzards, the greatest scrambling and flapping that the boys had ever witnessed. Down jumped the black mob into the pen, hissing and struggling, each one trying to gobble up all the meat it could before the rest got it. Then they flew up on the fences and buildings, and waited for another supply.

Meanwhile Ned had sneaked near them behind a fence, and got in several shots before the buzzards took alarm. Then he hurriedly fixed the camera for a quick shot, and gave them two "barrels" a-wing, while they still circled reluctantly about before going off. Jim had also taken some general views, so already, the very first day, the boys had successfully "bagged" some new game,—yes, and two kinds at that, for there were both species of buzzard, or vulture, represented at this banquet, the turkey buzzard and the black buzzard or carrion crow. They can readily be told apart,

because the bare, skinny head and neck of the turkey buzzard are red and of the other black.

"I expect," remarked Ned, "that the people down here'll laugh at us for hunting buzzards as game. But that's the advantage of our kind of hunting. Every living thing is game, and it's open season the whole year round."

As they talked about game, crossing a bit of pasture overgrown with weeds and baby pines, they discovered some game of the regulation kind. All of a sudden, with a tremendous whirring of wings, a covey of about fifteen quail burst out from right at their feet and went whistling off like so many bullets. Ned was so taken by surprise that he never once thought of his camera, but stood gazing after them with his mouth ajar.

"Oho!" screamed Jim, doubling over from laughter, "you're a dandy sportsman, aren't you? If you don't know enough to fire, you'd better let me carry the reflex."

"You couldn't have shot, even if you'd had it yourself," retorted Ned. "The slide was over the plate, and no one on earth could pull it out quick enough for a shot after quail had flushed. But I may get them yet. They alighted over there in the next lot."

So he got the camera all ready, and, when they came near where the birds had alighted, held it in

front of him, ready for instant use. The game had run ahead, but presently they went up like rockets, so quickly that Ned couldn't get much aim or focus. Yet he heroically blazed away, though, as he found out later, to his sorrow, he had nothing on his plate save some blurred bushes. Even Dad failed, too, for it is a very difficult stunt indeed to stop a flying quail on the plate.

After quite a long walk through the pine country, during which they had a good chance to watch the process of turpentine farming which is carried on so much in the South, they came to a marshy pond which was grown up a good deal with grass and cat-tails. At first they didn't see any game, but presently, as they walked around it, up sprang a bunch of little ducks, which Dad said were green-winged teal. They are swift in flight as they are small, and got off so fast that none of the party "shot" soon enough to have them show much on the plate.

"Never mind, boys," said Dad, "we'll get to a place before many days where you'll see ducks enough."

However, they were to get something from the pond. Coming to some open water they saw a pair of gray birds, as big as medium-sized ducks, swimming away, bobbing their heads back and forth in a very amusing manner. They were the American coot, or mud-hen, a bird quite often seen in the fall in northern ponds. They are rather tame, so Ned

was able to get two pretty fair pictures before they were too far out.

No sooner had he done this than a queer-looking bird suddenly came up from under water, and sat on the surface, looking at them. Evidently it didn't like the looks of the party, with their dangerous weapons, for it suddenly ducked forward, plumped its head into the pond, and the funny little stump of a tail followed after it like the proverbial tails of Bopeep's sheep. It was, Dad said, a pied-billed grebe, or dabchick, a water-bird something like the loon, but much smaller. These birds are all great swimmers and divers, and the present one showed how expert it was, for it swam off under water and didn't show itself again.

It was now time to return to the Pass, which they did by a different route and without any startling adventures, making, in all, a tramp of about twenty miles. Along toward supper time they swung into town at a brisk pace, none the worse for wear, acting as though they were good for another jaunt after supper.

"You boys are all right," remarked Dad; "you show your oats, so I'll let you pass muster. I've no fear at all but what you're good for the proposition we're going to tackle."

The evening was spent very pleasantly in sorting out their luggage and packing in their valises just as little as would be absolutely necessary for a short

cruise, and talking with the warden while they worked. Now that they had a real live game warden all to themselves, it was a grand chance to pump him, for these men are supposed to have a great many dangerous adventures and to lead very exciting lives. So they went to work asking him all sorts of questions, and soon discovered that he was a splendid pump. The stories kept pouring out as long as they wanted to work the handle.

"Tell us fellows, won't you," asked Ned in eager tones, "what was the most exciting arrest down here that you know of?"

"I've had pretty live times with some mighty desperate customers," replied the warden, "but a thing that happened to a friend of mine, a Louisiana warden, was a closer call than any I've had. It wasn't exactly an arrest, though, because he failed to land his man. But I'll tell the story, and you can see what you think of it. The Game Commissioner himself will vouch for it that it's true.

"The warden was sitting on his porch one hot day in the middle of the close season on game, when he heard someone shooting back in the swamp, to the eastward of his house. Right away he got his gun and saddled his horse, and rode out into the swamp in the direction that he thought the gunshots sounded. When he thought he might have got somewhere near, he tied his horse and started afoot to see what he could find. He went along for half

a mile or so without seeing or hearing anything. Then suddenly, without the least bit of warning, he came right chock on to a big husky negro in the thicket, with a gun in his right hand and some song-birds in the other.

"It would be hard telling which was the more surprised of the two. The negro was watching for a bird, and hadn't heard the warden coming until the warden almost bumped into him. If the warden was surprised, the darkey was frightened, because he knew he was breaking the law and was caught red-handed. The scare made him just like a wild animal that only thought how he could escape, and didn't care how he did it, so long as he only got off. He did the first thing which came into his head. Before the warden could speak a word, the negro jumped on him like a wildcat and knocked him down with the butt of his gun, grabbing the warden's gun as he fell. There he stood over the fallen warden, with his gun raised for a club, and was just going to knock his brains out.

"It was up to the warden to do some quick thinking, you can just believe. That kind of a surprise either will make a man's brains work lively, or else it will paralyze them. We wardens have to get used to being in tight places, and this one wasn't easily scared. He saw that the negro had him, and it would be foolish to move, but that his only chance would be to talk the fellow over.

“‘I wasn’t going to hurt you, boy,’ he said, as quietly but quickly as he could. ‘What made you knock me down? I’m no enemy of yours. Let me up, like a good fellow, and I’ll go along about my business. I won’t lay this up against you, because I know I scared you. I didn’t know you were here, and you scared me too.’

“‘What you doing in here?’ asked the negro sulkily.

“‘Why, I own some timber, and I was going in to have a look at it,’ answered the warden.

“‘Why you have that gun then?’ inquired the negro suspiciously.

“‘Just the reason why you did,’ said the warden; ‘I hadn’t got any meat at home, and I thought I might find some out here in the swamp.’

“‘Ain’t you de game warden?’ asked the assailant.

“‘Didn’t I just tell you I was the lumberman,’ said the warden, evading the question. ‘This timber’s all ready to cut, and this winter I’m going to hire a lot of you boys to do it. It’ll give you work all winter, but if you kill me there won’t be work for any of you. Besides, my friends’ll be on your trail with bloodhounds, as soon as they miss me. They’ll sure catch you, and they’ll lash the hide all off you first. Then they’ll tie you to a stake and build a big bonfire all round you, and roast you alive.

That won't pay you to kill me when I haven't done you a bit of harm, and don't intend to do you any. What for do you want to get yourself in such a terrible scrape? Just let me go now, and you'll be all right.'

"This sort of talk made the brutal African hesitate. The idea had got an entrance into his thick skull, and he was slowly making up his mind what he would do. It was just nip and tuck for the warden, between death and life. The least little thing might decide it either way. It took the coon at least a minute to decide, and that minute was the most horrible one in the warden's whole life. He said nothing to anger the darkey, and at last his coolness won out and saved his life. The negro decided not to take the risks he would run by adding murder to his breaking the game laws. So, aiming his gun at the warden, and telling him not to move till he got out of sight, he backed off, watching the warden all the time till he disappeared. Of course the warden couldn't do anything, especially as the fellow had taken his gun along, too. He didn't know who the darkey was, and he never saw him again. He didn't arrest his man that time, but he was mighty lucky to save his life."

"I should say as much!" cried Ned excitedly. "That certainly's a corker of a story."

"I hope we don't run across that kind of game

on our trip," said Jim rather thoughtfully. "I'm afraid we shouldn't have the nerve to photograph it."

"It isn't likely," said the warden, "that you'll strike it quite as bad as that. But when you're cruising around with game wardens in a wild country like it is down here, you never can tell what you're going to run up against. Most of the time, though, there's no trouble at all, and then, the first you know, you've got just all you want. You know they murdered two of the wardens in Florida not so very long ago. A warden has an awful dangerous job. He'll be walking along in some thick place, and all of a sudden some wretch may shoot at him from behind a tree, and no one will ever know what became of the warden that never comes home."

"Even when you aren't trying to arrest anyone," asked Ned, "don't you have some dangerous times cruising around these waters, with the big storms they tell of down here?"

"Yes, indeed," replied the warden, "we fellows have to take lots of chances that way. When it's pleasant down here it's so warm and gentle that strangers think it must be that way all the time. If they stayed here awhile they'd find out different."

"Tell us about one of those storms, won't you, please?" asked Jim.

"All right," answered the warden good-naturedly, "I'll tell you about the scrape we got into not so

very long ago. It'll be two years next February. The boat we had then was down to New Orleans for repairs. It happened that Mr. William Dutcher, the president of the Audubon Societies, was coming down here from New York, and he wanted to see the boat. So another warden and I had to go and bring her back.

"From the Mississippi River we cut across through a bayou into Lake Ponchartrain, and then started to run out into the Gulf through the Rigolets, the channel that connects them. The weather was looking bad, but we thought we might finish the run before the storm came on. But before we could quite get through the passage it suddenly burst on us with a fury most people who don't know this coast wouldn't believe was possible. It wasn't the regular season for tornadoes, but anyhow this was something just about as bad. Within half an hour after it started in, any number of boats and vessels all around these parts were blown ashore and wrecked, or else capsized. Our engine was just nothing against such a wind, and in next to no time we were driven ashore right under a high steep bank. The waves were pounding the boat on the lee shore, and we were sure she'd go to pieces in a few minutes of that sort of handling, so we strapped on life-preservers, to try to save our lives.

"Just then we saw a big sea coming, a sort of tidal wave, I'd call it. It rolled on to us, and picked

up the boat like a chip. Of course we expected it would smash us against the bank, and that would be the last of us. I'll never forget how it felt when we were most smothered in the wave, clinging to the rigging, and being hurled along toward that high bank, waiting for the crash, which didn't come. Really, if you'll believe me, the wave carried her right over the top of the bank, and dumped her, right side up, a hundred yards back on the prairie, safe and sound. In about a minute, instead of pounding the bottom out of our craft on a bad lee shore in a heavy gale and surf, in danger of our lives, we were safe on land, in what was as good as a house. That's what you boys call 'going some,' isn't it! The storm kept on raging all night, but we didn't care.

"Next morning four negroes came along. We asked them what they were doing there, and they pointed out their schooner, which had been driven ashore, about a mile back on the marsh, further out toward the Gulf than we were, where the wave went higher. They were most starved, and had come over to try to get some food. Their time wasn't as valuable as ours, we thought, and I offered them about all the grub we had aboard if they'd help us right away to get our boat afloat. They took up with the offer, and we certain sure had the tug of our lives. By using the anchor, cable, winch, rollers, and all the elbow-grease we could muster,

we worked the boat to a lower part of the shore, and got her afloat before the tide went down.

"About three hours after this we sailed into the Pass, and gave our friends a big surprise. Mr. Dutcher had come, and he was mighty glad we'd saved the boat. I recollect how he asked which way we came, and I told him we came by *land*, part of the way!"

After this story telling, the conversation turned to geese, and the warden told his guests that though there were more geese where they were going later, a good many tended on the outer point of the island which they would reach to-morrow. He thought that they had better explore the main part of the island first, and then try for the geese.

Finally the boys turned in, but it took a long time to get to sleep, with all their exciting anticipations of the Gulf of Mexico and the adventures that lay before them.

CHAPTER IV.

THE ISLE OF CATS

THE next day was a perfect one for the cruise, clear as a bell, with a nice sailing-breeze from a northerly direction. After an early breakfast, the warden and his visitors started for the water-front, to get aboard and be off. Now the boys had their first good view of the Gulf of Mexico. The wind being off-shore, the nearer water was very quiet, but further out there were white-caps. The deep blue expanse was everywhere dotted with sails, the oyster fishing fleet, engaged in dredging up oysters from the State reefs, where oysters had been planted for the public. From the sandy beach were built away out into the water long piers, on piles driven into the sand, for boating, bathing and fishing.

The Pass is quite a popular resort, both in winter and summer. Along the water-front runs a beautiful avenue, paved with ground-up oyster shell, hard and smooth, shaded by palmettos, live oaks, and other trees. The boys were surprised to notice that in some places banks of beach-sand were piled up along the street, and even across it in some of the neat yards.

"That was blown in," said the warden, "in the great hurricane last month. In some places the avenue was buried up with it eight feet deep. The tide went all over everything away back to those hotels. You see how the planking and the bath-houses on most of the wharves are torn up. That was what did it. We have some awful storms here, with the wind blowing nearly a hundred miles an hour."

"I hope," said Jim, "that it won't blow like that while we're out."

"We certainly hope not," replied the warden, "but you can't tell what's coming, unless you're ashore and see a government storm-warning. But when you're out of reach of such conveniences you just have to run your chances and do the best you can."

The craft on which they were to embark was a rather small sloop, neither handsome nor fast, yet good enough for the purpose. She was anchored out beyond the end of a wharf, where the tender had been tied. Some men had appropriated the latter, and it took some shouting to make them bring it back. Meanwhile a wagon drove up with provisions, and then they had to lug out all the stuff over a single line of planks on the storm-racked wharf.

"Never mind," cheerily remarked Ned, "we're lucky to have any wharf left at all, and we'll soon be off now."

And so they were. Things were quickly handed down into the rowboat and stowed away on board the sloop,—the *Laughing Gull*, her name was. The boys were only too glad to hoist the sails and raise the anchor. As soon as she had gathered headway the captain put up the helm, running off to the southeast, and slackening his sheets as he did so. The wind from the port quarter filled the sails, and the *Laughing Gull* showed them her prettiest paces, boiling through the oyster fleet out into the blue Gulf.

Away off in the dim distance was a large island that loomed up dark, with its forest of tall pines.

"That is called Cat Island," said the warden, "the best hunting ground in the region, where lots of gunners go from the Pass and other towns around. We'll go ashore there, and to-night we'll stay in the bayou on the south side, where it's good safe anchorage."

"Why is it called Cat Island?" asked Ned. "Are there wildcats on it?"

"Not exactly," said the warden, "but there are lots of coons. It was named away back by the French. The story goes that when these explorers landed there, they saw many coons, with their bushy tails and sharp little ears, prowling around, and thought they were cats. So they named the island 'Isle au Chats,' or, as we say in English, Cat Island."

"Are the coons still found there?" inquired Jim, in a tone which indicated that he was afraid they must have been cleaned out long ago.

"Sure," replied the warden, "plenty of them. To-morrow morning we'll get up a coon hunt, and you'll have a chance to find out."

"Hullo!" cried Ned suddenly, "what in the world is this monstrous brown bird with the great beak, coming over to starboard?"

"You'll see plenty of them," said Dad. "This is your introduction to the brown pelican. They're great fishermen. Watch him now, and see him catch a fish."

Just now the pelican checked his flight, poised himself in the air, and then pitched down headlong into the water, with a tremendous splash. He disappeared from view, but presently came to the surface with a fish side-wise in his bill. Dad pulled out his strong 8-power binocular and handed it quickly to Ned, saying, "Now you can see better what the old fellow will do."

For some seconds the solemn old pelican sat there stupidly blinking, to get the water out of his eyes, the boys thought. But he had a mouthful of it, too, to dispose of. This he did by contracting his pouch and letting it run out of his bill. Then he bobbed his head about till he got the fish turned around, head first, and, with a great gulp, swallowed the struggling victim down whole. It must have

tasted fine, for he sat there a moment looking very much pleased with himself. Then he spread his great wings and flew away after another fish.

As they sailed on they saw more and more pelicans fishing, and also gulls flying about to pick up drift matter from the water. The gulls are a good deal like the buzzard in a way, because they are the scavengers of the ocean, as the buzzard is on land. Some of the gulls were the familiar large herring gull, which the boys had seen frequently in winter around the docks of New York City. There were also numbers of the smaller laughing gull, from which species the sloop was named, and some few royal terns. Then they began to see small flocks of wild ducks, which helped to make things interesting.

Of course, the boys wanted to steer, so the captain let them take turns, showing them where to head, just south of the nearer point of the island, and admonishing them not to run off the course and jibe the sails, which might be dangerous in so stiff a breeze.

"I tell you what," exclaimed Jim, as he worked away at the wheel, "isn't this just immense, to be off yachting in winter in this fine southern sunshine and nice air, while there at home things are all frozen up! I just wish we could stay down here all winter and miss the old blizzards."

"You wouldn't get rid of all the cold, though,"

said the warden. "Sometimes it's pretty raw down here, and people feel the cold more. The houses are built up on posts, to keep out bugs, and the wind blows up through the floors. Not many of us have furnaces the way you folks do."

It took them longer to make the island than the boys had expected, considering the fine breeze, because they had to run away around a long bar that made out from the point. At last they rounded it, and then sailed, in calm water, under the lee of the sandy shore, on which they could see many flocks of shore-birds — sandpipers, plovers and snipes — running about and probing with their bills for dinner. The boys were very keen on shore-birds, which had become so scarce up their way. There were more of them here on this one shore than they had seen together in years.

But, fond as they were of shore-birds, they also had a great weakness for dinner. Amid so much novelty and excitement, they had clean forgotten it. Now the feeding birds reminded them of it, and they suddenly discovered they were as hungry as bears. Nor were they the only ones. So, by general consent, they came to anchor, and, while the boys, with the glasses, were making out the identity of the various species of shore-birds and ducks in sight, the worthy captain had started his charcoal fire, and the dinner was merrily cooking. Pretty soon it was ready, and everything spread out on

top of the cabin,— a big dish of spaghetti, meat, onions, bread, fig syrup, and coffee. The boys agreed that never in their lives had a meal tasted better.

Dinner over, they started on again, sailing past several miles of heavy pine forest on shore, avoiding a shoal, on which an oyster schooner was stuck hard and fast, and kept on up into the bayou, where they anchored, and then all got into the tender to go ashore.

Here also were flocks of shore-birds feeding, and Ned was very anxious to try his reflex camera on them. So they all squatted low and kept still, while the warden quietly sculled close along shore past the birds. There were quite a number of different species scattered about over the flats. Dad pointed out to the boys, as they approached, sanderlings, semipalmated, white-rumped, and red-backed sandpipers, kildeers and turnstones, with a few willets, dowitchers and lesser yellowlegs. There may have been others too, but the boat was getting very near, and Ned must now give his attention to the camera.

The birds were wonderfully tame, and, under the warden's skillful management, Ned found himself within ten feet of a nice group of them, his heart beating very fast. He kept cool, though, and got a good focus,— for with the mirror arrangement of this modern camera, holding it in his hands, he could see the images of the birds on the ground-glass, as

he looked through the hood on top, up to the instant when he shot. Then he let drive, and knew he had a good picture, as indeed he had.

The whirr made by the fall of the curtain shutter startled the birds a little, and they flew, but only to alight a few feet further along and resume their feeding. Quickly Ned changed plates, and inside of two minutes he had another good shot. He might have kept on all the afternoon, but after he had taken six pictures Dad thought he had better save some plates for the rest of the day, especially as the warden assured them that the shore-birds were plentiful there all winter. Ned was fairly wild with delight to think that at last he had actually taken pictures of shore-birds, which up in his country are most difficult subjects.

They landed on a nice sand-spit where the water was deep enough so they could row the boat right up to land. Close by was a little stake, which the boys found was to mark a pile of oysters which some settler had raked up in the bayou and had placed there in the shallow water for convenience. The captain offered to open some and let the boys find out how good these southern oysters were. They were great fat bivalves, fine to eat raw. When the boys had had a taste, they wanted more. In fact, they were so good that the party had to stop and eat another meal, in this open-air restaurant, before moving on.

The captain proposed to take the party across the island to the north shore and show them what he called the old homestead. Crossing a little creek by a rude foot-bridge of single plank width, they set out, scaring up some herons from the marsh, and starting a big eagle as they came to the pine forest on the other side. A pair of the eagles had a nest on the island, the warden told the boys,—a cart-load of sticks, high up in a whopping great pine.

From the sandy soil grew patches of scrub palmetto, whose sharp points were hard on legs and clothing. Above them towered the tall stately pines, with occasional patches of live-oak timber. It was hardly a mile to the homestead, and they would have reached it very quickly, had it not been for the attractions of a small nearby pond. As they came near it, Jim spied something in the grass.

"A snake!" he shouted, as he grabbed a stick and went after it pellmell, followed closely by Ned. Before Dad or the warden had time to warn them, the boys were in the grass. The snake had hidden, and Jim, not seeing it, stepped on the end of its tail, which made the creature spring at him, aiming a savage blow at his leg. Luckily it just missed, and before it could strike again the boys jumped back.

"Hold on there, you crazy youngsters!" shouted Dad. "Keep away from that snake! It's one of the deadly cotton-mouthed moccasins that are

poisonous as rattlers. Don't you ever in your lives again race after a snake that way, especially in the South. All these marshy places have moccasins, and there are rattlers in the scrub palmettos. You're so excited you forget what I told you before we started, always to look out where you step. That was a mighty close call for Jim, and neither of you want to have another."

"Now, boys," said the warden, "let me show you how to tackle a snake. Here, Jim, take this club. First we'll see just where he is. Careful now!"

Going ahead slowly and carefully, they examined the grass as they went, and presently saw the snake crawling away.

"Keep your eyes on him," said the warden, "and hit him a crack on the head. He can't spring back at you more than his length, if he can that. As long as you watch him and keep your hands and legs out of his way you're all right."

Jim lifted his stick and landed a hard blow just right, for it certainly stunned the snake, and a few more knocks made sure that it was really dead. The creature was nearly three feet long, rather stocky in build, and dark in color. The boys at first wanted to skin it, but it smelt so strong that they wisely decided not to.

"Let me give you a bit of advice about snakes, boys," said the warden. "Just remember there are millions of them, and you can't possibly clean them

out, or make any impression on them, even if you kill every one you see. They won't attack you unless you trouble them, or go to step on them. So the best thing you can do is not to waste your time but just let them alone. Then you'll probably be all right."

Starting on, they came soon to the homestead, a dilapidated old house, in sight of the sandy north shore, but back in the edge of the timber. The warden told them that long, long ago the Spaniards had given the island to a man named Cuevas. His descendants had afterwards sold it, but they still claim their old house and the piece of land right around it. A family were living in it now. They received their company very politely, and invited them inside to look around.

From its appearance the boys thought that the roof might fall on their heads if they made much noise, but they were interested in the ancient architecture, and especially in the many coon skins which were nailed up on the walls of the back room.

"That's the stuff," Ned remarked to Jim, "we'll have some ourselves about to-morrow."

There was another curiosity outside in the front yard, a great round iron basin, as big as a street drinking fountain for horses, an old-fashioned salt-urn. This was the way, in the old days, that the inhabitants got their salt. They filled it with sea-

water, and kept a fire going under it till the water had all boiled away, leaving a layer of salt.

Bands of hogs and cattle were roaming about, in a half wild state. There were several hounds here, too, for hunting coons, and two men whom they met asked the visitors to go coon-hunting the next morning, an invitation which the boys were not slow to accept.

With further conversation and tramping around, the afternoon had passed all too quickly. The sun set at quarter past five, and before dark they were again aboard the *Laughing Gull*. How cold it grew in the wind, out on the water! The boys shivered in the night air and gathered around the charcoal fire, beating their arms, as the warden prepared supper.

"Don't you wish you were in your warm home this December night?" said Jim mockingly to Ned.

"Say, if you don't quit that baby talk," answered Ned, "I'll pitch you out into the Gulf and give you something to shiver about. No home for me yet awhile. Hooray for Cat Island!"

They ate supper on deck, as there was not much room below. By the time they had finished, the charcoal was reduced to embers, giving forth no smoke and little gas. The fumes of charcoal are dangerous to inhale. But the captain set the fire-pot down at the rear of the cabin, with the hatch

open just over it. This let out all gas and at the same time made the little cabin nice and comfortable. There they sat for awhile listening to the captain's stories of adventure, and then, without much undressing, they pulled the blankets over them and were off to sleep.

CHAPTER V

GEESE, FISH, AND COONS

ALL night the party snoozed away, as comfortable as bugs in a rug. Somehow Ned seemed to have forgotten the coons and to be having a mix-up with the wild geese which he had come so far to find. He was hiding in a blind on a point waiting for them to come. Finally he heard the honking, faint in the distance, but growing louder and louder. He squatted very low without moving a muscle until he thought they were near enough for a picture, then suddenly jumped up to aim his camera, and as he did so, the whole flock came down right around him, smashing down his stand and beating him with their wings, while a couple of them tried to land on his head. This was rather too much of a good thing; he began to shout for help.

Then he heard and felt something else. Jim was shaking and punching him and shouting—"Hurry up and see the geese!"

"Geese!" grumbled Ned, "can't you see I've got geese enough already?"

"Come, come, you crazy," shouted Jim, punch-

ing him all the harder, "you're a goose yourself! Wake up quick, or they'll be gone." He dragged Ned out of the bunk, and by that time Ned was enough awake to stumble up the companion-way, rubbing his heavy eyes. He heard the honking of geese now for sure. Against the pale sky tinted by the rosy hues of dawn were a great long double line of wild geese, fully seventy-five in number, headed right for them.

"Well, I declare," exclaimed Ned, "now I know what made me dream about geese! But this is a lot better than dreaming."

With a chorus of loud, harsh honkings the big birds swept past, right over their heads, perhaps a hundred yards up. They looked rather dark in color in the dim light, yet there was light enough to show very readily what each observer instantly noted, that quite a number of the geese had white heads and necks.

"Dad," exclaimed Ned, almost in a whisper, "aren't some of these our blue geese?"

"Yes, boys," replied Dad, "we've found them, sure enough. They're here, just as we hoped and expected. Captain," he asked, turning to the warden, "how about these geese with white heads, do you know them?"

"Sure," answered the warden, "those are what the gunners down here call 'white-necked brant.' There're plenty of them from November to March.

We have some other kinds of brants, too, about the same size, smaller than the big Canada geese. All the brants flock together, but the big fellows mostly keep by themselves."

"That's fine," said Dad, "it shows we're on the right track. Now we have our work cut out for us all right. This is only the beginning of it. We must learn all about these geese, go where there are the most of them, get photos of them, and see just how they live. Then when we go home we can write them up and publish the pictures."

"By the way, warden," he said, addressing that person, "have you ever seen any people down here studying these geese?"

"Nearly a year ago," answered the warden, "there were two men that I took out. They were looking up fowl. One of them was more interested in hunting, and the other was studying birds, but I don't think he learned much about geese. That time the weather was bad, and, we couldn't get anywhere near them, not near enough even to tell which kinds they were. They went right home after we got back to the Pass."

"Do you know who they were?" asked Dad.

"I can't think of their names now," said the warden. "They only came for a day, but I think they belonged in Washington."

"Aha," said Dad to the boys, "that gives me an idea. That's probably how those others whom

I know about got on to it. When these men went back and told what they had seen, like as not the way they described the geese that they saw off here, or maybe down in Louisiana, too, gave others the clue. The question is whether anyone has been after the geese this season. We'll see what we can find out."

"Captain," said Ned to the warden, "aren't these geese headed for Goose Point, where you said they go to eat sand?"

"They're sure headed right for it," replied the warden. "They've probably been feeding up Bay St. Louis all night, and now they'll go out to rest on the sandy point at high water and eat sand. To-morrow morning about this time we'll have an engagement to meet them there."

"That's right," said Jim. "But, captain, there must be other kinds of sport around this island, aren't there?"

"Well," answered the captain, "there's pretty good duck shooting, especially in late October and November. There are quite a number of ducks now, you see, scattered all over the bay. A good many of these are sea ducks, and it's harder to get near them. But earlier quite a lot of mallard and pintail and teal, and some other kinds of fresh water ducks go in to feed in the little ponds on the island. But they are gunned so much they get driven out."

"Isn't there some good fishing, too?" asked Ned.

"I was just going to tell about that," answered the warden. "Yes, there's splendid fishing in all these waters. There's no better place anywhere for tarpon, and lots of them are caught. Besides this we get redfish, white trout, sea trout, Spanish mackerel, weakfish, bluefish, mullet, and a lot more."

"Wow," cried Ned, "wouldn't I like to land a big tarpon!"

"We haven't any tackle aboard for those fellows," said the warden, "but I'll tell you what, boys, you might try and get some fish for breakfast. Sometimes they'll bite right where we are, though it isn't a very good time on such a cold morning."

The boys had been so excited that they had not thought about it being cold. They had slept so warm in their bunks that they were surprised enough to find the deck slippery with white frost. However, they were game to earn a breakfast, so, with the help of the warden, they got out the lines. Really, they should have had poles, but by casting the lines well out and pulling them in they might persuade some fish to bite. For bait the warden gave them scraps of fat meat.

For some time not even a nibble rewarded them. Jim was casting from the stern, and Ned from the starboard side, up forward. Presently they happened to throw together, and curiously, at just the same instant each had a strike. The fish that the

boys had before this been accustomed to were the light-weights most often taken in over-fished New England,—small brook trout, perch, and roach, or at best a medium bass. What they had now hooked were a very different proposition. It seemed to the thoroughly electrified boys that they must each have been tackled by sharks or sea-serpents.

“Oh, glory!” shouted Jim, as he tugged and struggled. “I’ve got a whopper here, if I can only land him!”

“And don’t forget it,” sang out Ned, who was also working his passage, “that there’s a big one coming here, too!”

The fish fought hard and leaped as they came to the surface alongside, which brought them on deck with a grand rush at about the same time.

“Good work, boys!” exclaimed the captain, “a couple of as nice sea-trout as you need to see. Now we’ve got all the fish we need for breakfast.”

The boys were anxious to try again, and the warden let them, though he knew that after all the commotion they would get no more in such shallow water.

The fire was soon going, and the smell of the fresh fish frying made the boys perfectly ravenous. When it came to eating them the fish tasted even better than they smelt.

By eight o’clock everything was washed up and put away, and they all rowed ashore, eager for the

fray with the coons. The two hunters with their hounds, were waiting for them on the sand-spit, whiling away the time by eating oysters. One was a man about thirty-five, the other a youth of eighteen. Each carried a double-barreled shotgun. The dogs were four in number, and looked as though they would make it hot for the coons. Dad and the warden had some other explorations to make, so the coon-hunting outfit now consisted of four hunters, with a dog apiece.

The plan was to hunt down to the east end of the island, the end opposite to the one they had first approached in the sloop. They were to follow parallel to the shore on the edge of the pine woods just back from the bayou and the marshes. The coons were likely to be spending the day quietly dozing in the thick grass or palmetto scrub, or by a fallen log. Ordinarily, they have a nest in a hollow tree, or in a cave on a rocky ledge, or even in a burrow. But on these southern islands there are almost no hollow trees, no rocks at all and the sandy soil caves in so badly that it is hard to make burrows in it. The dogs range around until they get on a fresh trail. The coon has no safe retreat to hide in, so the dogs soon trace it out, and either catch it in the grass or make it climb a tree, where it is easily shot. If it should have a burrow, the soil is so light that it is easy to dig it out.

So the party set out, following along the edge

of the pinery. The boys were in high spirits and excitement, expecting that something would happen pretty soon,— as it did. The hounds were ranging about, nosing for a trail. Presently one of them sang out and was off with a dash, the others following in hot pursuit. It was not long before there was an even bigger commotion. The dogs had started the coon from a thicket of palmetto scrub and young live-oaks, where it evidently had been dozing. Leaving this cover it made for the marsh. The coon, though, is a slow runner, and no match for the hounds. They caught up with it not far from the edge of the marsh, in the long grass. Judging by the sounds, it must have put up a pretty good fight, but when the party ran up it was all over. The dogs were worrying the carcass, and their owners were just in time to drive them off and save the pelt from being spoiled. Here the grass was so long that there was no chance for a good picture, even if they could have caught up before the kill. The coon was a good fat fellow, and heavy, but the younger of the hunters carried it easily by the hind legs, and they all started along to find another.

Coon tracks in good number showed very plainly in the rather firm mud along the edge of the marsh.

"I say, Ned," exclaimed Jim, "just look at these tracks. Don't you call that heel-mark just about like a man's?"

"Yes," said Ned, "it looks almost as though some tiny little Tom Thumb had been by here. It might be fun to meet a dwarf, but I'm satisfied with the coons."

After walking about two miles further, they reached the head of the bayou, near the main part of the island, and struck across the sand-dunes to see what was called Great Sand-Hill, a wonderful mass of almost snow-white sand which in the distance, as it sparkled in the sun, looked like a snow-covered hill, or a glacier.

They had given up all idea of seeing coons out here in the open, and so were mightily surprised when the dogs suddenly started one from a bunch of grass. With a great hue and cry the dogs all put for it, and for a while there was a hot chase. Fortunately, the coon headed right in front of the boys, giving them a fine view of the hunt and a splendid opportunity with the reflex camera. Ned very wisely was carrying it ready for business, and he was well repaid for his forethought. As the chase passed nearest them the dogs were almost up with their quarry. Just as the foremost dog was seizing it, Ned let drive, and got what proved to be a most remarkable hunting picture.

Of course, before Ned could change plates the affair was all over, and the coon was dead, but he was thankful enough for one chance like that.

"It's worth the cost of the whole show," Ned remarked, as he set the camera for the next shot.

Passing by the wonderful sand-hill, the outfit took to the woods on the north side of the island, in big pine timber. The first thing they knew the dogs had dislodged their third coon. It did not trust much to its heels, but scrambled up a pine, and sat up among the top branches, near the trunk, looking down at them, until brought tumbling down by a shot from the older hunter. Before this, however, Ned took a couple of pictures of it up in the tree.

The main part of the island is about six miles long, running east and west. They kept on, now, pretty well toward the west end. At just about the same time both the boys spied, up in a whopping big pine, a very large nest, a platform of sticks big enough to hold a man.

"That's the eagle's nest," said the older hunter, "but there's nothing in it now. It's too early in the season for the eagles to be nesting."

"I'm not so sure about that!" exclaimed Ned, as he examined the nest with his glass. "It looks for all the world like some bird sitting in it. Say, just see those ears sticking up! I believe it's a great horned owl. Well, of all things, what luck!"

Each of the party took a look, and then they walked up near the tree and tried again.

"Well, well," exclaimed the older hunter, "I'll be shot if that ain't a coon!"

Sure enough, that peculiar narrow face did not look quite so much like an owl's at this distance, and the bristling mass was clearly fur instead of feathers.

"I remember now," said Ned, "that once in a hemlock grove, up in Connecticut, I found a coon in the daytime in a crow's nest. I looked up the coon in a book and it said that they sometimes sleep in daytime in crows' or hawks' nests. But I should hardly think that a coon would dare to try an eagle's nest! If one of the eagles should happen around there would be one coon less in the world."

"It wouldn't be any harm," remarked the hunter, "if all the coons on the island were killed off. We could breed quail on here and have thousands of them if it wasn't for these pesky coons. They're great fellows to suck eggs, and there couldn't a quail or any other game-bird have a nest without the coons' getting it. So I'm going to shoot this coon in the nest, and anyone that will bring it down is welcome to it. Maybe, though, it will jump down."

Bang! went the gun, but the coon didn't start. A pellet had gone into its brain and it was killed instantly.

"So I can have the coon if I climb to it, can I?" asked Ned.

"Sure," said the hunter, "but I don't think there's anyone here man enough to shin that tree."

Why, there isn't a limb within fifty feet of the ground."

"You'd better not be cock-sure," said Ned, "till you've seen me try. Up our way we boys do some pretty tall climbing."

Near by was a small pine which had blown down. Placing this against the butt of the tree, Ned got up half way to the first limb without much trouble. Then came the tug of war. It pretty nearly winded him, and the hunter thought he would surely slide back down. But by taking it slowly, he finally clutched the lowest limb, and drew himself up on it, where he waited awhile to get his breath. The rest was comparatively easy, except when he reached the nest. He might have reached over and pulled down the coon, but he wanted to be able to say that he'd been in an eagle's nest.

Aided by a convenient branch back of the nest, he finally struggled up over the edge, and stood up in triumph on the platform, holding up his coon which he had won, while Jim snapped him on his lofty perch, seventy-five feet from the ground. Then down came the coon and Ned followed himself, but making haste more slowly. By being careful he got down safely, having worked up a considerable thirst and a keen appetite by his admired performance.

The rest were hungry, too, so they got out the



NED IN THE EAGLES' NEST.

"STOOD UP IN TRIUMPH ON THE PLATFORM, HOLDING UP HIS
COON."

THE
LAW

OF
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lunch and the water bottle, and cleaned everything out in good shape.

Four coons for four hunters the boys considered satisfactory enough, and they started back to meet Dad and the warden at the boat on the sand-bar, where they ate some more raw oysters, then paddled aboard the *Laughing Gull* and got sail on for Goose Point.

CHAPTER VI

ON AND OFF GOOSE POINT

THE northeast wind which had been blowing moderately all day lasted just long enough to serve the purpose. It sent them scurrying with free sheet out of the bayou and off abreast of Nigger Point. There the captain hauled up more on the wind, and ran straight for Goose Point, a long, low stretch of sand which was barely visible in the dim distance. Off on the starboard beam they could see the dark, low-lying Louisiana marsh.

Late in the afternoon the *Laughing Gull* ran up under lee of Goose Point. When about quarter of a mile off, the captain luffed her up. Jim let go and hauled down the jib, and then Ned hove over the anchor, after which both boys manned the peak and throat halliards and lowered the mainsail. It was fine sport for them.

"You boys are just the fellows for me," remarked the captain encouragingly. "I only wish I could have you for my crew all the time."

"We'd like nothing better," replied Ned, "but I'm afraid Dad has some other work cut out for us."

With their glasses they could see a number of

large birds on the sand-bar out at the end of the Point. Dad told them that the bunch farthest out were pelicans, but the other company were geese.

"It looks promising," he added, "for to-morrow."

"How are you going to work the game?" inquired Ned.

"We won't disturb them at all to-night," answered Dad. "They'll fly off soon to their feeding-grounds, and won't get back till about sunrise. Our work will be to get out there early, dig a hole for a blind, with seaweed piled up a little around it, then grade it up with sand so it won't show, and get hidden before the geese begin to come back. Then we may have some sport."

During the morning they had noticed white flimsy clouds, the cirrus scud, or mares'-tails, streaming like long ragged ribbons across the sky. All through the afternoon it was clouding in thicker and thicker. The wind kept dropping more and more, till, after they had anchored, it had almost died out and began to veer. When it got into the southeast it held there, and began to breeze up.

"I haven't liked the looks of the weather all day," said the captain. "By rights we ought to have run back for the Pass. But, seeing that you wanted so much to look up those geese, I thought we could take a chance."

"It won't take long in the morning," said Dad,

"to do what we want to, and then we'll run back. If it blows too heavy we can put into the bayou again till the storm is over."

"The only trouble about that," said the captain, "is that we haven't got very much grub. It's a good safe harbor there all right, but sometimes those storms last for days, and we'd get all out of provisions. I'm afraid those boys would have a sick time of it. I notice they can eat some."

"Don't worry about us, captain," put in Ned. "I know we've got appetites all right, but just think of all the oysters and fish and ducks and coons in there! It would be a cold day when we got starved out."

"Now you speak of coons," said the captain, "what do you say to eating coon to-night?"

"Is it good?" asked Jim.

"I think I can fix it up so you'll like it," said the captain. "Anyhow, come on and let's try. Get your coon, Ned, and we'll see what we can do for him."

Ned brought the coon which was lying up on deck. The captain got out a sharp knife, and between them they had his jacket off in a jiffy. When the charcoal fire got busy, the coon was in for it, and other things as well. Now that the wind had got to the southward, it was not as raw as the night before, and the supper on deck was a comfortably swell affair, without the bother of "dressing for

dinner." The coon lay weltering in a rich gravy, surrounded by a fine crop of sweet and Irish potatoes. There were canned peas and tomatoes, big loaves of bread, butter which had not seen sun enough to make it squashy, and the best of oysters for an appetizer. Then came canned peaches, with condensed cream, cakes and a fine lot of tea.

"If anybody calls for anything better than this," said Ned, "he must be a hog, no matter who he is."

"Well," replied Dad, "to tell the honest truth, I hadn't any thought of complaining, but I guess I won't anyhow, seeing there's such a heavy penalty for grumblers. But you just bear in mind, Ned, tomorrow when I rout you out before daylight, there's to be no growling like this morning, or we'll have to give you a bucket of water to start circulation."

"That's all right," spoke up Ned. "When I get a chance at the geese with the camera I'll show you how."

Even with all the hot "vittles," and the change of wind, the company began now to discover that there would be no trouble that night from the thermometer rising too high. As the wind increased they were glad enough to get in under cover.

"What time shall I set the alarm for, captain?" asked Ned, as he was winding up the clock.

"I think four o'clock will be all right," replied the captain. "You ought to get ashore about five, and have your blind made before it gets too light."

But after each day's field-work, before turning in, there was always some routine work which had to be attended to, no matter how tired they were. For one thing, the notes and records must be written up. To postpone this would only make the records less valuable and accurate in detail. Another work, the last of all, was the changing of plates, to pack away those exposed during the day in their original boxes, properly labeled, and to fill the holders with the fresh ones. This plate-changing has to be done in the dark, or by a faint ruby light. As it was inconvenient to carry around a ruby lantern in traveling, Dad had taught the boys to work in the dark, by feeling only. So now, when everything else had been done, the plate-boxes were spread out conveniently in a bunk, the lights were all put out, and, by working carefully and with system, everything was at last done up in order and without any blunder.

"Wouldn't it be terrible," Ned remarked, "if I should make a mistake, and put some geese on the same plates with coons!"

"Indeed it would," said Dad, "and that's why we've got to be just as careful as we know how to be."

It took them a good hour to do this properly, and then, at nine o'clock, they were glad enough to be through with the task, and to be able to follow the warden into the Land of Nod. The boys were so afraid that the alarm might fail to go off that they

were rather restless. When Ned, at one time, roused up, it seemed to him that he had slept a long time, and that it must be nearly daylight. So he struck a match, and was amazed to find that it was only eleven o'clock.

No honking of geese disturbed anyone during the night, but the moaning of the wind through the rigging and the pitching of the boat made the older members of the party somewhat anxious. Though they were now under the lee of the land, if the wind should haul further to the southward it would be a bad place to lie.

"Ding-a-ling-a-ling!" went the alarm and caught them all napping. The captain was the first out, to take an observation of the weather.

"It looks pretty bad," he said, "and it won't do to stay here very long. However, I'll set you ashore, and come back to keep an eye on the boat. When it gets light you can see her from wherever you are. If you see the flag hoisted, it'll be a signal to come aboard and light out."

After a hurried lunch of coffee and crackers, they piled into the tender, cameras and all, though it was doubtful if there would be light enough to get any pictures. To keep them dry in case of rain they carried rubber focus-cloths.

Getting out in the shallow water on the sand-flat, the trio waded ashore dry-shod, thanks to their rubber boots, and proceeded along the rather wild strip of

dry sand out toward the point. It was still quite dark, and the only sounds were from the pounding wind and the booming surf which was piling up on the outer beach.

A walk of less than a mile brought them to the last of the dry sand at the end of Goose Point. Here was the place where the geese were most likely to come.

"Now, boys," said Dad, "let's get busy and dig a fine deep hole. Make believe you're digging the Culebra Cut, and see how fast you can make the dirt fly."

When it comes to sand, boys are natural diggers, just like woodchucks. With some pieces of board for shovels, besides the clam-hoe which Dad had brought along, they made rapid progress, and soon had a fine great hole, plenty big enough for three. Luckily the conditions were the very best for digging a deep and dry hole. The ridge was high enough so that the bottom of the hole was above sea level. A little below the surface the sand was moist and firmly packed, so it would not cave in.

Next they brought some armfuls of dry seaweed from above high-water mark. With some of it, under Dad's direction, they made a rim around the stand, not too high, and then graded it up with sand, so it would not show from the outside. Good fortune had also put in their way some long sticks and branches of trees cast up by the waves. These

they laid partially over the blind, strewing them with some of the moist seaweed which would not so readily blow away. This would cover them enough to hide them from sight if the geese should circle overhead before alighting. After the geese alighted they could move the branches a little and have plenty of room to peep out at them without being seen, and even use the cameras. When everything was ready they crawled in, one by one, through the principal opening, and then pushed one of the branches partly over that.

"This stand's a gem," remarked Dad. "It doesn't show from beyond, and from above it would look like just a layer of drift-weed. If this happens to be the place where the geese want to come, I don't see what's to hinder them from landing almost on top of us. I learned the trick of building such a blind from a very successful goose hunter in the South. He told me how one time, when the geese got tending on the end of a sandy point, he hid himself before light in a covered hole like this one. By and by a flock of big Canada geese flew in, and he watched them dangle their legs to alight only a dozen yards from him. Just about that time he raised particular Cain with them!"

At last, now, it was getting light, though it was a dark cloudy day. Lines of ducks began to fly past the point over the water. In such a breeze the pelicans were unusually active, taking advantage

of it to go scaling over the disturbed waters of the Gulf.

"Well, boys," remarked Dad, "you can congratulate yourselves that you're off in a wild, lonely place now for sure. Here we are, out in the dawn of a winter morning hiding for geese on the point of a lonely island in the Gulf of Mexico. Doesn't that sound like the real thing?"

"Yes," replied Ned, "and I'll bet some of the fellows in school, plugging away at their Latin and algebra, will be thinking of us and wondering what we're doing. I tell you they're missing fun!"

"Before the geese come," continued Dad, "let me tell you another thing. Geese are shy birds, always on the lookout for gunners. Before they alight they'll study this sand-bar very carefully. So when we see them coming, we must squat down low and not move a muscle, especially when they are overhead. You can watch them through the holes as they come, but don't turn your faces up if they fly over. We want to have them alight, because it will be too cloudy for flight pictures, but we might get some timed ones of them on the sand."

The time dragged along but no geese came. The boys got rather restless, for, besides being dull work, it was pretty chilly, and the sand blew in their eyes.

"You can be thankful, though," said Dad, "that it isn't summer, because then the mosquitoes and flies would about eat you up."

"Honk, honk, gabble-gabble," suddenly sounded faintly in the distance.

"Here they come," said Dad. "Get ready now in comfortable positions, so you won't have to stir when they are near, and choose a peek-hole so you can watch them. See, there they come, up in the air to the northwest, right against the wind, a nice bunch, Canada geese for sure. Notice how big they are, and what long necks they have."

Nearer they came, lower and lower, headed right for them. "Quiet now," whispered Dad, "don't move!"

There were about fifty in the flock. As they came near they swerved and passed outside the point. Then they turned and made several wide circles a good long gunshot up. Everything looked right to them, for they circled lower and lower. At length, as they turned to the windward they set their wings, and glided toward the extreme end of the bar, about fifty yards from the blind. Dangling their legs, down they went upon the sand, the whole line of them, and stood erect, their long necks in air, looking for trouble.

"Oh, what a sight!" whispered Ned. "What a fine picture that would make! What shall we do, Dad?"

"It's so far," said Dad in his lowest tone, "that the telephoto on the small camera is the only thing. Keep the tripod away down short, and Jim, you get

out the camera. Here's the telephoto lens. Let me put it on. Now, keep your heads down below the top of the blind. We'll make a little break in the side and point the camera through it. Stand it up very slowly. Here! No quick motion or the geese will see it. Now, slow, get your head under the cloth and focus. How do they look?"

"Not so very large," whispered Jim hoarsely, his voice quivering with excitement, "but they are spread out over the plate, and it looks fine. My, but what long necks!"

"Now," said Dad, "put the plate in, and I will prop the front-board with this stick, so it won't tremble with the wind. Hurry, now, before they go to feeding. Give them five seconds, in this dull light. That ought to be enough, on open sand and water."

Jim squeezed the bulb, and counted twenty-five, then let go, and the shutter closed.

"Good for you," whispered Ned; "they didn't move!"

"Hurry," said Dad; "turn the holder, and try it half as long, for fear there may be more light reflected by the water than we think."

Just as Jim had fired his second shot, "Honk, honk" they heard again.

"Hullo," exclaimed Dad in a whisper. "Here are some more of them."

"Oh, glory, glory," chuckled Ned, "just look what's coming, a whole army, as many as a hundred

of them! Here, sit still you old heart, you; don't beat so loud or they'll hear!"

"Boys," said Dad, as he laid a handful of seaweed over the camera to better conceal it, "I believe these geese are the smaller kinds and some of them probably are the blue geese that we're after."

"They've got white heads," whispered Ned. "I can see them!"

The geese on the point began honking, in answer to their cries. Seeing their companions already on the point, the newcomers, trusting to their judgment, abandoned all reserve, and came straight for the point and the blind. The boys were fairly trembling with excitement, and even Dad was in danger of goose-buck-fever now.

"Don't for your liver stir or wink!" whispered Dad. "Keep your heads down in the sea-weed. Don't turn to look at them when they are near."

"Can't I try them with the reflex," pleaded Ned.

"No, no," whispered Dad. "It's too dark for such a short exposure, and it would scare them all away. It'll be best to let them light, if they will."

Then a roar of wings and a chorus of harsh voices burst right upon them, like a sudden squall. Ned's dream had almost come true. The geese were flying into their faces, alighting on the stand, beating them with their wings? Well,—almost, but not quite. It seemed, anyhow, as though they were going to

do this. The flock came low down over the sand, right for them, all around them.

When it was evident that there was to be such a close call, each one of the party sank down on his face, and lay prostrate. The flapping of wings and the honking was so loud that it really seemed as though the geese might alight right on top of them. They did not, but descended upon the sand all about them, and the three were in the midst of a goose and gander party.

For some minutes none of them dared to stir, for fear of alarming the geese. Though they could not see yet what was going on, they could hear. Even in the wind it seemed as though they could *hear* the geese listen and crane their necks to make assurance doubly sure. Then the call-notes of the great birds grew less wild. They began to lower their voices and talk in a more familiar way, as though they were becoming composed, or were beginning to feed.

"Boys," whispered Dad in the faintest murmur, "keep perfectly still while I raise my head and tell you what to do."

With the greatest care he got his eye to a peek-hole, and whispered to the boys to do the same. The sight that greeted them was one of the most wonderful they would ever witness in all their lives. They were in a regular barn-yard of blue geese. These rare geese with white head and neck, were scattered

about on the sand right before them. Some were yet looking around; others dabbled their bills in the sand, shoveling in grist for the gastric hopper.

How dead easy it seemed! Except for their color, they might just as well have been a flock of tame ones on a farm. Their actions were not especially different from ordinary tame geese, except that they showed more grace and alertness in their movements.

The Canada geese down on the point were interested in the arrival of the newcomers. Presently they began to waddle in their direction, and soon were scattered about among them. It was a wonderful sight. Not only were there around the stand Canada geese and blue geese, but also a number of the kind known as the white-fronted goose, which had come in the same flock with the blue geese. They were about the same size as the blue geese, but had only a patch at the base of the bill white.

For quite a while the little party watched the geese, hardly daring to move or breathe for fear of alarming them. When they had learned everything possible about their ways, it was time that something else should be done. After a whispered consultation, they decided to get all the cameras ready and see what they could do, though Dad feared there was little chance for success.

The plan decided upon was first of all to try for silently taken pictures with the small camera, through the low side of the blind. It was almost certain,

though, that some of the geese would discover them when they moved and tried to focus. If by any chance this should work, by short-timed exposures, they would get all the pictures they could, and then at the last, as the light was a little better, stand up suddenly and try a slow snap with each of the reflex cameras before the geese should have time to start up.

They were just beginning very cautiously to remove the telephoto lens, so as to use the ordinary one, for short-distance work, when one of the tall geese happened to ramble along in their exact direction and came right to their pit. The first thing they knew they found themselves face to face with a big wild goose. It would have been hard to say which was the more surprised of the four. Ned and the goose were the first to recover their presence of mind, for each did so at exactly the same instant. Ned made an excited grab for the goose. The big bird, with a mighty leap and a frightened outcry barely escaped him, and flopped off with wild honkings. What a commotion there was may be imagined, a general mix-up and scramble to get away, a wild honking, an amazing beating of wings. Pictures were out of the question now. Away went the geese with disordered ranks, while the camera-hunters stretched their stiffened joints and watched them go.

"I tell you what," said Dad, "you boys have had a wonderful experience, the like of which you may never have again as long as you live."

"I had no idea," exclaimed Ned, "that wild geese would come up to a blind like that."

"Neither had I," said Dad, "but to-day everything was in our favor. It was rather dark, and the strong wind kept them busy. Then, the sand was moist enough so we could dig a good deep hole, and not too wide. Our gray mackintosh coats are just about the color of the sand, and we had everything covered with sand or sea-weed in fine shape."

"I wish, though," said Jim, "we could have had good light and taken a lot more pictures."

"Yes," said Dad, "and yet, if it had been bright, we'd probably have snapped the geese as they came, and scared them, so we should have missed this experience. We shall have it to think of as long as we live, and probably before we go home we shall get the pictures all right, down in Louisiana. Well, we aren't very far from there now. That marsh you can see to the south'ard is Louisiana, you know."

"Look!" cried Ned. "The captain is hoisting the flag."

"He saw the geese go," said Dad, "and I know he's anxious to get off, for the weather looks worse and worse."

By the time they had walked down opposite the vessel, the captain had come ashore for them.

"We're in for a wild trip home," he told them. "While I was waiting I put double reefs in the sails. It will be a dead run right before the wind all the

way in, with a big following sea, as soon as we get out from under this lee. The *Laughing Gull* has just all the work cut out for that she'll want, and a little more."

"If you think it's too bad," said Dad, "you'd better run in to the bayou. We can probably buy some grub from that family on the Cuevas place."

"We'll see how she gets along," answered the warden. "But I think we can make it home. Only I don't want any scared passengers. Just all hands keep cool and be spry to help, and I think she'll go it."

As the wind was liable to veer to the southward, when the boys broke up the anchor the captain put her on the port tack, so as not to have to come about if it did veer. How she did slide to leeward! Goose Point simply melted away like magic. The further they went the rougher it grew. The wind increased at times to violent squalls, so that had it been from any other quarter than well aft, the craft could hardly have carried sail. As it was, it forced her down more and more into the seas until the captain, who was a powerful fellow, had all he could do to keep her from broaching to.

"Come away aft everybody," he called, "and keep her nose out all we can."

By the time they were doubling the bar off the beacon at the western end of the island, the wind had canted enough so they did not have to come about,

but there they struck a bad tide-rip, the tide running strong against the wind and partly across it, kicking up a frightful sea for so small a craft. She plunged and labored so hard that the first they knew the fastenings of the block on the peak of the main-sail gave way, and down came the peak, streaming out ahead.

"Are you going to luff up and fix it?" inquired Jim, rather anxiously.

"Not on your life," said the captain, "unless I have to. She'll go easier with the peak down. I wish now I'd dropped it before, and saved it from breaking."

It was now raining hard, and blowing heavier all the time.

"Bad, bad," the captain muttered to himself; "too much wild goose chase, but I'll get her in just the same!"

"I don't see how you can get ashore, captain," said Ned, as the waves reared themselves toward the beach. "There must be an awful surf on now."

"Indeed there is," he answered. "It'll be making a clean breach over those piers. No one could land there now alive, I can tell you. We've got to head to the westward of the Pass and run up into Bay St. Louis. There we can find anchorage under a lee, and we'll go home on the cars."

The southerly gale certainly tried to do its worst, and in fact by night had whooped it up so that the

Laughing Gull could not possibly have kept in commission. Fortunately, however, she had long before that run into the bay, and was safely at anchor in a sheltered cove, with everything tied down snug. The party had taken the train, and were back at the warden's, packing up. Next morning it was still raining and blowing, but land navigation was not as dangerous as out in Mississippi Sound, and they took the train for New Orleans.

CHAPTER VII

A QUEER RAILWAY JOURNEY

ARIDE of a little over an hour from "The Pass" took them beyond the dry pine country out upon the great Louisiana marsh. For a time they saw belts of cypress timber, huge trees growing from the water, heavily bearded with the gray southern moss. Between these strips was open swamp, with its long grass and reeds and frequent pools or small ponds. Upon the surface of these, floating or feeding among the lily-pads or "bonnets," were occasional parties of wild ducks, coots, or grebes. There were plenty of boat-tailed grackles with their great fan-tails, and now and then some heron or bittern sprang up and fled before the approach of the train.

Further on it was open, treeless marsh, extending for miles and miles, with the same pools and high vegetation covering the treacherous expanse.

"Here's the place," remarked Dad, "where they manufacture mosquitoes wholesale. Down here in summer they just eat you up, and you have to fight for your life every blessed minute. Just now, though, in this cool weather, they're pretty meek, and only a few are stirring. But you'll see enough of them

in a few days, when the sun gets in a little of its warm work."

Towards noon the train pulled into New Orleans, and they stayed over another day to see this interesting southern city. It seemed strange enough to them to see roses and other flowers in the gardens in full bloom almost at Christmas time. They enjoyed the beautiful avenues of palms, and the southern air. Across the great thoroughfare, Canal Street, was a huge sign, "Welcome to the Winter Metropolis of the South."

"I suppose," observed Ned pompously, "that means *us*. Of course they must have heard of our famous wild goose chase, so they put that up to encourage us."

"We don't need any encouragement," returned Jim; "we've got just all we can hold now. If they gave us too much, there's no knowing what might happen."

"It certainly does mean us," said Dad, "and all other people, too, who have any money to spend."

During this little stay Dad saw his friend, and found it was all arranged that they should next go by rail and steamer to the last settlement down the Mississippi River, and then start off in a power-boat with game wardens to explore the wilds around the mouth of the great river.

The morning for their start was clear, and very cold for New Orleans, with ice in the gutters. The

party were called at six, in plenty of time to make the 8:05 train, which started from the other side of the river. Somehow, though, the boys were tired after so much hustling around, and were slow about getting up and dressing. When they were ready it was so late that Dad thought they had better make sure, since this was the only train that day which they could take, and get their trunk over to the train before breakfast. Then they could eat in the depot restaurant and take their time.

The delivery wagon took the trunk to the ferry, on which they crossed the Mississippi to a large town or city called Algiers, directly opposite. When the gang-planks were put out, the party stood by the trunk, waiting for the deck-hands to put it ashore, but no one offered to touch it. Dad hurried to find the captain or some officer.

"Why don't you set my trunk ashore?" he asked of the first one he met.

"We don't attend to that," he replied gruffly; "it isn't our business."

"I'd like to know what you run a ferry for," said Dad somewhat angrily. "Didn't I buy tickets for our party and pay for the trunk in advance?"

"I can't help that," said the official testily; "the express companies attend to transportation. You ought to have hired a wagon to come over with it to cart it off. But the boat's going back now. All ashore that's going!"

"Well, but how am I going to get my trunk out?" exclaimed Dad. "I can't carry it all that distance. It weighs 150 pounds."

"Maybe you can hire someone ashore," he replied. "Better get off and find a man. The boat will come back in a little while."

There was nothing else to do, so they hurried ashore just as the gate was being closed, and went up to the ferry-house, to interview the young woman in charge.

"Please tell me," said Dad politely, "where I can find a transfer company to take a trunk from here to the depot."

"There aren't any transfer companies over here," she replied.

"Well, but who could I get to cart my trunk?" said Dad.

"I don't know of anyone," she said.

"But surely there must be someone in this city who handles freight," persisted Dad.

"Why," said the girl, with more sympathy than the ferry-boat officer had shown, "I believe I have heard of a man who might do it. He keeps a store, two blocks down that way on the corner."

"Well," said Dad to the boys, "this place does beat the Dutch, but I suppose we must hunt him up. Come on."

The store was not open so early, but a colored girl directed them to where the owner lived. There

the shutters were drawn, and no one responded to their knocking. So back they went to the store, and this time found the proprietor sweeping the sidewalk in front of it. Dad explained his errand.

"Sorry, boss," he answered, "but my horse feels kinder sick this morning. Couldn't take him out nohow."

"Well, who^W could I get?" asked Dad.

"Dunno," said the man, "but if you go down yonder two blocks to the paved street, and a couple of blocks up that, there's sometimes a dray on the corner."

Impatiently Dad turned on his heel, and they hurried to follow the directions. There was no dray in sight. After several more fruitless inquiries, Dad vainly tried to bribe a grocery delivery man. At last they spied a boy with a dray and hailed him.

"Don't believe the boss would let me," said the boy; "he's sent me on an errand."

"Will you if he says you can?" asked Dad. "I'll pay you well. Where's the boss?"

"Around that corner, and then two blocks on," he replied.

Luckily, the boss gave the longed-for permission, so they piled into the dray and raced for the ferry, as fast as the poor little skinny mule could go.

The boat was just coming in, but there was no trunk on board. Then they discovered that it was the wrong boat, so they had to wait for the next

one. Meanwhile, Dad told the boy to drive down to the wharf.

"Can't do it, boss," he said; "they won't let you, no one but the transfer companies from across the river."

"But it's a long way down there," said Dad. "How in the world can we get that heavy trunk away up here?"

"Maybe they'll lend us a truck on board the boat, and we can wheel it up," he suggested.

The boat came in. No one would move a finger to help, but they finally hunted up a truck, got the trunk on it, and between them all they managed to push it up the long steep incline. The mule, fortunately, had not run away, and they lifted the trunk into the two-wheeled cart.

As Ned started to jump in up front, the boy driver shouted,— "Keep away from there! That mule will kill you! He kicks awful!" So they all jumped in behind.

"Now, sonny," said Dad, "it's almost train time, so hurry all you can."

The depot was only two blocks away, and they rattled merrily down hill. But when they come to the level of the unpaved street, the mud was so deep that though the mule strained and struggled, he finally gave up, and stopped, fairly mired.

"Come now, boys," exclaimed Dad, "we mustn't

lose that train, we're so near. All overboard and pull her out. Never mind muddying our shoes. We can't help it."

All jumped out, laid hold of the dray, and pushed and pulled, while the driver shouted and cracked his whip. At last the outfit actually moved, and went floundering through the miry clay.

"Hooray," cried Ned, "here's the train; it hasn't gone yet!"

The boy drove right up to the baggage car, and the trunk was put aboard. Checks were unheard of on that railroad, and tickets almost so, but at this station, the only station on the line, they did have them for sale. This was where they expected to have breakfast, but the "depot" was a mere board shanty, and there was no more show for a restaurant than though it had been down on the Louisiana marsh.

It was now just eight o'clock, and there were five minutes for refreshments. The boys were just about starved, to say nothing of Dad. The idea of a day's ride on the cars without food was dreadful to contemplate.

A colored train-hand was the man of the hour. He took in the situation, and pointed out a little shabby grocery a block away. The proprietor stood at the door.

"Hullo, there!" he shouted. "Put up lunch

for three, right quick, the train's going in a minute." The boys rushed for the store, and Dad to buy the tickets.

"What kind of lunch do you want?" asked the proprietor languidly, as the boys raced into the store.

"Oh, anything!" cried Ned anxiously. "Only please do get a move on, or we'll get left."

"Do you want sandwiches?"

"Yes, sure, anything!"

"Will you have five or ten cent sandwiches?"

"O gracious!" shouted Ned, "anything! Yes! Ten centers! Big ones! Hurry up!"

Ned had now aroused the family somewhat. They were at breakfast, at which the principal dish was a platter full of big pork chops. A girl behind the counter got out three whole loaves of bread, each of which she slashed down the middle with a butcher-knife. A younger girl brought out the chops. The older one stuck a chop between the halves of each loaf, and, presto, the sandwiches were made. Into a large paper bag they went and into another several double handfuls of crackers and cakes.

"All aboard!" shouted the train-hand.

Ned planked down half a dollar, and the boys ran and scrambled aboard where Dad stood, and proceeded to troop into the car. Though there were

some women in it, the car was blue with smoke, filthy, and cold.

"This must be the smoker," said Dad; "let's find a better place."

Going out, they met their friend, the train-hand.

"Better go in," said he; "we're just starting."

"But we don't want to go in the smoker," said Dad.

"You'll have to," he replied. "That's all the car there is, except one for colored people. The rest of the train is freight cars."

With a sigh, Dad resigned himself to the inevitable, so they took seats near the front door, and pitched into their breakfast, such as it was, biting at the hard crust, and gnawing away at the bony remains of a scrawny old razor-backed hog.

"I had no idea," remarked Dad, "of what we were going to be up against. We'll have a pretty uncomfortable day of it. But in one respect we're fortunate. I didn't suppose that there was a single one of these old-time railroads in the South, that had stayed just the way it was before the war, but here's one of them for fair, probably the last one. I understand that northern capital has just bought it, and probably it'll soon be brought up to date. So we're still in time to try it in all its barbaric glory. It runs from Algiers right down the Mississippi River for 59 miles to Buras, and they say it

takes about all day to make the run. Judging by the name, it ought to be quite a grand affair — the 'New Orleans, Fort Jackson and Grand Isle R. R.' — but it doesn't appear that way so far."

During the first hour the train may possibly have made ten miles, but probably less. Full speed was about as fast as a man could run, and the usual rate at about a "dog-trot." There were no stations, and they stopped wherever anyone wished, at the various plantations. By this time the sumptuous breakfast had been disposed of, and it was too cold to sit still, so they strolled to the rear of the car, where some of the other passengers were huddled around the old rusty stove, the only heating apparatus for the car. The colored guardian of the public comfort had started a fire, and dumped in a great mass of soft coal, one chunk of which completely filled and choked up the entire barrel of the stove. Without troubling himself further about it, he had left for parts unknown, like as not for a nap in the baggage car. The thing was smoking furiously, and every time the train stopped there was a back-draught, and the smoke would pour out into the car. It seemed to be the fashion for all the passengers to take turns poking it, so Dad and the boys tried their hand. With a stick they managed to punch a hole in the big lump and get some draught up through, so in time the stove actually began to feel warm to one's hands on the outside.

They were now down in the region of rice and sugar-cane plantations. Except at the very first, the train ran close to the west bank of the great river, just behind the levee. Though the water was not visible, one could see the masts and rigging of vessels as they pushed along up-stream. Rows of willows grew along the water-front of the levee and back of it were frequent groves of orange trees, laden with golden fruit. In the gardens various sorts of vegetables were growing. It felt too cold for such things, with a sour northeast wind, and mercury in the forties, but this would not last long, and the warm sunshine would soon follow. The rice was all cut from the wide fields with their ditches, but some of the sugar-cane fields were still uncut. The tall cane stood up like giant corn. On railway sidings were open freight cars with a lattice arrangement like a hay-rigging, to carry cane to the mills. The country was perfectly flat, and back from the railroad, but nearer and nearer to it as they progressed southward, began the interminable marsh country. It was all new and strange to the boys.

At one plantation some of the passengers got out and brought back with them an armful of sugar-cane. Those of the passengers who liked to chew sugar-cane assembled and proceeded to get busy. This was all the dinner there was, unless one had brought some along. The way to serve it was to

cut the cane in thin sections, and chew it simply for the sweet sap. It is nearly as hard as a rock.

"People with poor teeth," said Ned, as he struggled with it, "had better let the stuff alone."

It was a unique sight to witness this feast, reminding one of a company of woodchucks, as they gnawed away at it. Piles of chewed-up cane began to appear on window-sills and floor, till the whole place was littered with it. The conductor did not seem to care.

"I think these jaw gymnastics," remarked Jim, "help to start circulation, for I certainly feel warmer."

To enliven the journey, there was music in considerable variety. One passenger, a drummer, sang operatic airs with acceptance. Another less desirable sort was from the car's rear door. Probably it had never been oiled since the car went into commission fifty or more years ago. Every time that anybody opened it, those rusty hinges gave a fearful groan.

"Just as though we didn't suffer enough," sighed the musical salesman, "on this abominable railroad with all the other discomforts without having *that* too!"

"What's the matter with that door?" said he to the conductor, when this official made one of his rare appearances.

"Didn't know anything was the matter with it," replied the conductor.

"But don't you notice how it squeals whenever you open it?"

"No, I hadn't," he replied.

"Just see!" said another passenger, as he opened the door and got an answering scream in testimony. "Can't you get some oil? We'll fix it for you."

"Oh, bother, that's nothing, and I haven't got any oil," said the conductor, as he passed on.

Another kind of music interested the boys considerably. One passenger carried in a basket some fowls which cackled more or less. Another had a box with two young pigs in it. To keep them still he had brought a nursing bottle, with rubber nipple, and some milk, and had amused the passengers very much by nursing them from time to time. At last the milk gave out, and pretty soon the pigs missed it. They set up such a shrill and constant squealing that life was hardly worth living for some of the unfortunate passengers. At last the pigs got so hungry that they broke through the slats of the box and scurried through the car, squealing to beat the band.

This gave the chance for a hunt which was almost as exciting as the blue goose chase, and decidedly more laughable. All the passengers took a hand in

it, but none of them were in practice for an athletic event of this sort which required so much skill. The pigs had not been greased, but they seemed as slippery as eels. People fell over one another in their efforts to grab the elusive rascals. There was a general mix-up. Everyone was screaming with laughter, but the little porkers outdid them all in output of noise.

In the midst of all this the slow train came to a sudden halt at a sugar-cane plantation. The conductor opened the car door, and instantly the pigs bolted out, jumped off the car, and made a sprint for liberty. Their owner was hot-foot after them, and so were the passengers, as soon as they could pile out of the car, even the conductor and the trainhands. The plantation laborers also joined in the race, and there was the greatest game of tag in progress that the boys had ever engaged in. Finally a big burly negro, as he reached for a pig, tripped, and fell right on top of it. He managed to hold it, and Ned, trained to nimbleness by his camera-hunting tramps, was the lucky one to lay hold on the other.

The proprietor of the plantation, hearing of the cause of all the trouble, kindly offered a supply of milk, which the owner of the pigs was only too glad to accept. So he filled up his can and bottle, and proceeded to nurse the little miscreants, one at a time. Jim held the other envious squeaker, while

Ned hustled for his camera and took pictures of the feeding process.

This exercise and fun was just what the chilled, suffocated, exasperated passengers needed to make them feel like themselves again. But another hour in the cold, filthy car, with the smoking stove, made them all once more unhappy. There were long waits at plantations to put off freight, and the train was two or three hours behind the schedule,—if indeed there was one. No one in the car had ever heard of a time-table being issued by the Company. There was a tradition, handed down from the past, that the train was due at the end of the line about one o'clock. No one, though, had ever known of it being so speedy. Three or four o'clock was its usual time, showing that its average rate of speed was seven or eight miles an hour.

"The distance, according to the survey," remarked the drummer, "from Algiers to Buras, is 59.6 miles. Thank heaven it isn't 59.7! I know I couldn't live through another tenth."

All things have an end, and so, at half-past three, the train reached Buras, the terminal. The only reason it was a terminal was that the rails ended here in the weeds and palmetto scrub. There was no depot, no accommodations, no dining-room, or even lunch-counter, no freight-house or baggage-room,—no nothing! The trunk was dumped on the grass by the side of the track.

There was, however, a dingy saloon, a store and post-office, and a bunch of loafers. Close by was the levee, and a little pier at which lay a small steamboat. In a quarter of an hour the mail would be sorted and the steamer would start down river.

Of course by this time the boys were nearly starved, and they and Dad went into the store, hoping to find something to eat. All they kept in stock was crackers and a few dry cakes. The boys bought some, while Dad was trying to find something more substantial. Outside the store a youth was hanging around. Dad went to him and asked him if there was any place where they sold lunch.

"You see that saloon, over yonder," said he, pointing out another forlorn structure in the distance. "Well, at the second house beyond that you might get something."

"I wouldn't dare try it," replied Dad, "for fear we might miss the boat, but wouldn't you do an errand for me?"

The youth said he would, so Dad handed him half a dollar, telling him to run there as fast as he could, buy anything they had to eat, and hustle back before the boat started, and he would pay him more for his trouble.

The fellow stood awkwardly, looking at the money, without moving.

"Come, come!" exclaimed Dad impatiently. "What are you doing standing there! Why don't

you get a move on you? Hustle now, for all you're worth."

This started him off shambling at a provoking leisurely gait, urged on by the boys, who had come out, as though they were trying to drive a mule.

"It's no use to try to hurry him," said Dad. "Poor fellow, he never was taught to hurry, and he doesn't know how. These people down here are all Creoles, good-natured, kind-hearted folks, but most of them take life pretty leisurely. Some of them are enough to drive a busy man crazy."

They stood and waited for the youth, but there was no further sign of him. At length the mail went aboard, and the whistle blew to start. "All aboard," said the captain; "we can't wait."

"Do you know who that boy is that I sent on an errand?" asked Dad of a man who came out to see the boat off.

"Yes," he replied, "he's my cousin."

"Well," said Dad, "is he honest? I gave him some money and sent him to buy us some lunch."

"Sure he is," said the man. "You see, they're cooking dinner for you."

"Cooking dinner!" exclaimed Ned. "Well, I never! And you told him to get back in ten minutes, before the boat left!"

"That's just characteristic," said Dad. "Well, come aboard, and we'll see what we can do there with the rest of that dollar."

The lines were cast off from the flimsy little landing, and the little steamer swung down stream in the great tide of the mighty Mississippi. The river seemed to be about a mile wide, and looked very muddy, from the soil which it is constantly washing down. A fringe of willows grew on the levee, but otherwise the country along this lower part of its course is perfectly flat and open. Several large ocean steamers were in sight, going up or down the river.

The food question, however, was of more absorbing interest, even than sight-seeing. It did not take long to find out that there was no arrangement for feeding passengers on board. The engineer, however, did make coffee for the crew. He was a pleasant fellow, and was so moved by Dad's pathetic tale of their starving condition that he took pity on the unfortunate travelers, and not only made a pot of coffee, but actually dug out a loaf of bread, butter, and a can of corned beef. They all pitched in, and never stopped till they had cleaned up every last crumb and fragment, after which they were in a condition to enjoy the sights of "The Father of Waters."

The boat touched at a few little landings, on both sides of the river, putting off a passenger or leaving supplies for those who had ordered them. At any place where they wished the boat to call, a white flag was set up on the landing. There was so much

to interest the boys in all this life and scenery so new to them, that they were almost sorry when, at sundown, the steamer reached Venice, one of the last settlements, their stopping-place, and left them and their trunk on a little pier so frail that they thought the trunk would surely go overboard.

CHAPTER VIII

CRUISING DOWN THE DELTA

THE game warden, with whom they were to go cruising, was awaiting them at the wharf. Willing hands took hold and dragged the trunk to a little store and post-office at the back of the levee. Leaving it to be sent along later, the warden took the party first to his own house for supper. To reach it they used the only road which this low-lying country knows,—the top of the levee. It really makes a very good highway. It is about the width of an ordinary country road, and smooth from much travel, both of feet and vehicles. With a border of willows on the river side and on the other a variety of shade or fruit trees and shrubbery, it makes a pleasant shaded lane. In some places it is more open, but this was in a settlement. The river sparkled through the willows, while opposite were occasional houses, generally painted white, simple but neat in appearance. Between them, along the levee, were fine orange groves, laden now with fruit.

Reaching the house, the warden's wife served them a fine meal, and now, for the first time in

twenty-four hours, the boys had all they wanted to eat.

After supper they went on further to the home of a Creole orange-grower, where they were to sleep. Among themselves the family spoke French, but they knew enough English to make it pleasant for their guests.

"Boys," called Dad from the back porch, "come out here and see something!"

When they came they found something well worth while. The whole piazza was festooned with wild ducks and geese, hung up to be taken to New Orleans to market, on the steamer early the next morning. Two of the planter's sons were market hunters, and here was their kill.

"This is a fine chance," said Dad, "to study some of the game we are going to see. There are big Canada geese, white-fronted geese, a pair of snow geese, and best of all, a lot of the blue geese we're after. Then see all the ducks. There are some of the celebrated canvas-backs that bring such fabulous prices in the northern markets. And see the mallards, pintails, blue-bills, and green-winged teal!"

This certainly showed what sport there must be down in that country. The boys examined the game carefully, especially the blue geese, trying to get each kind fixed in mind so they would know it when they saw it later.

As they were tired by their hard journey they turned in good and early. All slept in a big attic chamber, in which there were a number of cot beds, — enough for them and for the hunters. As the mercury was down nearly to freezing, it was pretty cool, and the newcomers were glad to spread their overcoats over their beds.

Bright and early next morning they were out to see the sights and to start on the cruise. The planter had a fine orange grove here, and for the first time in their lives the boys were able to pick and eat oranges all they wanted. The dead ripe ones were lying on the ground, and were sweet and delicious. Though it was just after breakfast, the boys hardly knew when to stop eating.

"You make me think," said Dad, "of a boy I met in Florida. It was one noon, and he was sitting on the fence, sucking an orange. 'Well, sonny, how many have you sucked to-day?' I asked him. 'Only twenty-two so far,' was what he answered."

"That's going some," said Ned. "I don't believe we can beat that."

The harvesting of the oranges was interesting. Everyone who could be spared or hired was at work. The younger people did most of the picking, either from the ground or with short ladders, for the trees do not grow very high. Men then carried them in baskets to the sorting and packing house. This was a long low building, in which were great

bins of oranges, spread out a good deal, so they would not get bruised. Men were busy making crates to ship them in, while women were sorting them out, according to size, condition and quality, wrapping each orange in a tissue paper, and packing it carefully in a crate. When full, this was nailed up, labeled, and was ready to be shipped on the steamer.

Another thing which interested the boys greatly was a curious old-fashioned earthen oven out in the back yard. It was shaped something like a small locomotive boiler, but open at one end. The way they use it is to build a rousing fire inside, till the whole thing is very hot. Then they rake out all the ashes and embers, put in the dough or meat, and hang up sacking over the end for a door. They had a regular cooking range in the kitchen, but the mistress told them that these old earthen ovens would bake better bread than any iron cook-stove she ever saw. The boys wished they could sample some of it, but all the bread then on hand had been prepared the other way.

It was about eight o'clock when they heard the cheery voice of the warden hailing them. "All ready to start now?" he called. "I've got the boat here at the landing, and everything's aboard, when you are."

One could just depend on it that the boys were ready. Indeed they were more than ready, as far

as desire to be off was concerned. Bidding good-by to their hosts, they picked up their valises and cameras, and hurried to the pier. There lay a handsome 35-foot power-boat that looked as though she could skim along like a water-witch. She was fast indeed, and had been named the *Mallard*.

"Isn't she a dandy!" said Jim to Ned. "We'll have great times on board of her."

"Won't we, though!" cried Ned excitedly. "Oh, I'm so glad we've got here!" And to show how glad he was he began to dance and jump, till the little landing rocked as though it would go to pieces.

"Here, here!" called Dad. "I thought we weren't going to have any kidding on this trip! You work off your spirits by lifting that baggage aboard. Then you'll have to jump on quickly, or you'll get left."

"When you find me getting left on a trip like this," said Ned, "it'll be a cold day!"

It was an easy matter to get away,—simply to cast off the noose from the post and start the engine. The boys attended to the former operation, and the engineer to the latter, and they were really off.

The warden was of American and the engineer of French Creole descent. Each had either learned or inherited the French liveliness, and the boys were delighted with them both. From the very first it seemed as though they had known one another

all their lives, and they launched at once into a flood of joking and story-telling.

The *Mallard* was headed down and across the river to follow the east bank. On this side there were a few small settlements and landings, which became less and less frequent. About nine miles further down they passed the government quarantine station with its large buildings, and some distance below that they came to Cubit Gap, with a lighthouse on its further point. Here four branches of the river make off to the eastward. These are some of the many mouths of the great river, which on the map look like fingers reaching out in all directions.

After taking a picture of the lighthouse, the boat was headed into one of the outlets called Octave Pass. Near the entrance was a line of posts used to hold weighted willow mats on the bottom to keep the current from cutting a channel in the wrong place. On one of these stood a great brown pelican. It did not offer to fly, but stood there looking at the boat which was very rapidly approaching. Ned held his camera ready, and, as they passed at close range, he snapped, and got a fine picture of the old bird. As he still remained there, and Ned was so anxious for another shot, the good-natured engineer ran back past it again, and Ned got his chance just as the pelican spread its wings and launched into the air.

They proceeded now down through the pass, and soon knew what the real wild delta country was like. To see one place was pretty nearly the same as seeing it all. It is simply a vast salt marsh, with creeks running everywhere through it. They were on a muddy river about forty yards wide, flowing through a flat marsh, with reeds and long grass growing on the banks, and occasional patches of very tall cane. Except for an occasional low willow bush, there was nothing like a tree in the whole vast region.

Presently the warden ran the *Mallard* off to the right up a branch of the pass. This branch had smaller branches of its own, and these in turn divided into ditches or sluice-ways.

"Wouldn't this be an awful place to be left in without a boat!" said Ned to the warden.

"It certainly would," the warden replied. "A man would be in a terrible fix. The marsh is very boggy, and all full of deep holes, too. The creeks would head a fellow off all the time, and the mosquitoes'd fairly eat him up. Besides, the grass and canes grow away up over a man's head, and he can't see off at all. It's very dangerous to go in even a little way from the boat because it's so easy to get lost, and one might never be able to get back, but wander around and starve to death. So you boys want to be mighty careful."

The channel they were on led them out, around a sharp bend, into a shallow lake of some size. Their sudden coming surprised quite a number of ducks, which flew off in scattered bands in every direction, with a great whistling of wings.

"My, oh my!" exclaimed Jim. "What a place for ducks! It seems as though this whole region was just made for them."

"That's what it is," answered the warden. "It's just a great natural game preserve, but it's no place for people. Indeed, no one ever comes here except to hunt and trap."

"Are there many hunters in here?" asked Ned.

"Yes," replied the warden, "this season there are seventy-seven registered market hunters with licenses, besides lots of sportsmen who run down here in power-boats. They have some club-houses where they stay a few days, and they certainly get all the shooting they want. There's an awful lot of ducks and geese shot here."

"Tell us, will you," said Dad, "about your work as game warden, what you have to do, and what difficulties or dangers you're up against."

"Certainly," said the warden, "if that will interest you. Well, you see, we two are the only wardens in this parish, and we have hundreds of miles of this wild marsh to cover. We're supposed to keep men from hunting without a license, and to keep

those who have licenses from killing beyond the bag-limit. The law allows each hunter to kill up to twenty-five birds a day, and no more."

"Isn't it almost impossible to enforce these laws in such a region?" inquired Dad.

"There's not much trouble about men's hunting without licenses. The fee for residents is only a dollar, and twenty-five for non-residents. We know the local hunters, and they all take out their licenses. The hunters up New Orleans way know we are on the job, and that it doesn't pay for the sake of a dollar to run the risk of being caught. With the non-residents in the States near by, they get good shooting at home without coming down here. And if a man spends money to come, we'll say clear from New York to shoot ducks, it means that he won't mind \$25 more for his license fee."

"But how about the bag-limit?" put in Ned. "I don't for the life of me see how you can tell how many they shoot."

"We've got a system like this with the market hunters," the warden explained. "Every bird shipped out from here has to have a certain tag on it, or else it's contraband. We give the hunters tags, twenty-five to a man for each day they are out. So they can tag their own game."

"But you can't tell how many they shoot on any one day, can you?" asked Jim.

"No," the warden admitted, "that's where the

system falls down. If a man was sick one day, or it was too bad weather, or the birds weren't flying well, he could make it up the next chance he got. We're trying to think out some scheme to get around that. These market hunters destroy an awful lot of game, and they only pay a dollar for it. We may pass a law to make them pay more."

"Some day," said Dad, "they'll probably shut down on the sale of game, the same as they have done in many other States. Game isn't plentiful enough to supply the demand in this country. Just imagine the five millions of people in New York City being fed on wild game! In a short time that would clean out all the game in the United States."

"How do you keep watch of the bags of the sportsmen who come in here?" inquired Dad.

"Why," said the warden, "we try to see all of them we can and examine their kill, but of course we don't run across them all, and some of them may take advantage. The real, honorable sportsmen, though, obey the law, because they believe it's a good one, and it'll give them more good shooting in the end."

"You must have some exciting and dangerous times," said Ned. "Don't some of them try to kill you, if you find they've too much game and try to arrest them, or shoot at you when they see you coming?"

The warden laughed. "Well," said he, "we do

get into some sort of a scrap once in a great while. It used to happen oftener when we first began this warden business. The hunters understand us better now, though. We try to keep friendly with them, and do them favors when we can just as well as not, like giving them a tow or bringing them supplies. Besides, they know the Game Commission has plenty of money, and will spend any amount of it to enforce the law and break a hunter who makes trouble by taking away his license. And then, there are two of us, well armed, with the fastest power-boat in these waters. It's mighty seldom that any of them nowadays dare take such chances."

Running back out of the lake, they followed another of the innumerable channels back into Octave Pass, and presently came opposite the house of the Delta Club. No one was occupying the premises at this time, aside from a flock of grackles, save one very distinguished individual. A beautiful snow-white bird, of good size, with long neck and legs, was striding along the margin of the water, feeding as it went.

With exclamations of excitement, cameras were ready. "Why," exclaimed the engineer, "that's one of those white egrets!"

"Yes," added Dad, "it's not the common immature little blue heron, which is white, but the snowy egret, that carries the aigrette plumes in nesting-time, and has been almost killed off by the plume-hunters.

You can tell it from the other by its black legs. They're generally very shy from being hunted so."

To the surprise of everyone, this bird did not mind the quiet approach of the power-boat. It was so busy feeding that it paid no attention even when the *Mallard* ran close by it, and the cameras shot their harmless volleys.

"Oh!" cried Ned, "I know I got a perfectly bully picture! I wish I could get another."

"Maybe you can," said the friendly engineer. "I'll put back and see." So the *Mallard* was turned about, and they ran by the egret again, even closer than before. Ned got another picture, and then begged to be allowed to go ashore and stalk the bird. So the engineer stopped the machinery, and Jim set Ned ashore in the tender. Ned crept up behind the bank, very close, as he thought, and then suddenly raised up. There was no bird there at all. The snowy creature, though it did not mind a power-boat, knew a man afoot all right. Its keen hearing had discerned even Ned's soft approach over the wet ground, and it had flown quite a distance further. From the boat came Jim's mocking laughter. This made Ned all the more determined to succeed. He went back out of sight, and ran till he was behind the mark he had noted. Then he crept up just as silently as he possibly could, taking plenty of time. The egret did not hear him, and Ned gave it the surprise of its life,

as he shot it with his reflex so near that if it had been a gun the game would have been blown to pieces. Off went the bird in a great fright, away over the marsh, while Ned marched back in triumph.

Rounding a corner into a lead called Coon Bayou, they came to a boat-house belonging to the club, where one of the wardens stayed. The club leased a vast area of marsh and employed several men, it was said, to watch and care for it.

From here they twisted around into "No. 27 Pass," and saw their first palmetto shack, a hut made of thatched palmetto leaves, except for the frame. It was deserted now, the hunters having gone home for the Christmas holidays. Just then they heard another power-boat coming and a party of the market hunters appeared, likewise homeward bound, for Christmas. On the deck was a pile of ducks and geese, and a lot of mink and muskrat skins. They stopped for a few moments to chat, and, incidentally, the warden ascertained that their game was within the limit.

"That's the way it is just before Christmas," remarked the warden, as both outfits proceeded on their ways. "Down here everyone thinks a lot of Christmas, and they all clear out home. I want you to see some of the camps and the game, but it'll be good luck if there are any hunters at all left in this wilderness. But there's another camp in beyond here where there may be some of them yet."

This was up another turn, in Flatboat Bayou. As they approached they were delighted to see that this camp was occupied. Two men were busying themselves out in front, while a woman stood at the door of the shanty. Running up, the *Mallard* was tied to the wharf, and all hands jumped ashore, glad to chat with the hunters and to see how they lived. Under an open shed hung a fine assortment of ducks, fifty-two, the owner said, representing four days' hunting. He didn't shoot all the time, only in the early morning and about sundown, when the ducks were flying best. The rest of the time was occupied in trapping muskrat and mink. One of the men had just come in from tending muskrat traps along the shores of the bayous, and had heaped up quite a pile of them on the wharf.

"Say, Jim," said Ned, "how would you like the job of skinning all those muskrats?"

"I wouldn't mind it," said Jim, "if I could peel off their jackets as fast as those Frenchmen probably can."

"Yes," put in the warden, "they're crackerjacks at it. A heap like that doesn't trouble them much."

All their cruising around in the bayous was partly to show the visitors the country and how the hunters lived, but they had another important object in view. This was to find the place where geese and ducks were tending in the greatest number, so as to be ready to hunt them early the next morning.

One of the hunters kindly offered to show their visitors a place where the fowl were tending. So, after dinner, he came aboard and piloted the craft through all sorts of crooked channels out into "No. 27 Pass," near where it flowed into the Gulf of Mexico. The boat drew only about two feet of water, and yet it dragged on bottom before it got opposite the outer point. They could go no further, but were near enough, with the glasses, to spy out the game.

Several small bunches of geese and ducks, and a party of brown pelicans, were flying off from the point, where they had been feeding on the flats. Well out around the point, and quite a distance from shore, were a number of small flocks of geese, and, best of all, two large flocks of geese, one numbering some three hundred, the other perhaps half as many. Up in the air were a long line of big white pelicans, heading northward, moving along as evenly as a company of soldiers in line.

"Well," said the warden, as the boys were expressing their wonder and delight, "that may look very fine to you, but it isn't anything to what we ought to see. We haven't yet found the real stamping-ground of the game. Of course, we could build a blind here and get some sport. But before we decide, I'm going up to the mouth of Main Pass. Sometimes they feed in one place, sometimes in an-

other. But when you see the right place, you'll know it, and this here won't look like anything at all."

All of them were more than willing to be shown all the game there was. So they ran back to the camp, where they left the man with thanks and a reward, and pushed on up the pass.

"There's another camp back from here on Main Pass," said the warden, as he proceeded to unfold his plan. "Those men I know hunt off Main Pass, and if they haven't gone home for Christmas, we can find out all about it."

"I've always liked Christmas myself," remarked Ned, "but somehow this time it's almost getting to be a nuisance. Probably Santa Claus doesn't get down in this marsh, so they have to go up to civilized parts to meet him. But we'll miss him this year. He won't bring anything down here to us."

"Come off there," answered Jim, "and quit running down old Santa, you ungrateful fellow. Why, *this* is your Christmas present! Santa has given you this whole marsh, a power-boat, and by Christmas he'll bring you about a million ducks and geese, yes, and the blue geese, too. I bet we'll get the photos of them by that time! What more do you want?"

"All right," admitted Ned; "I won't be hard on the old gentleman. But there's something I was


going to ask the warden. Oh, yes, captain, I was going to ask if Main Pass is where the ships go out to sea?"

"No, son," replied the warden, "it's just as shallow at the entrance as '27.' All these passes have flats and bars at the mouth, unless the government keeps them dredged out. South Pass is the one which is kept dredged for the main ship channel, and they are working on South-West Pass, too. But all the rest are so shallow it'd be hard to row a skiff out through them. You see, the river washes down an awful sight of mud, and it piles up at its mouths. That's the way all this country was built up. Why, right where we are now, four miles inland from the gulf, they say that twenty-five years ago it was out on the open coast. Every bit of this marsh and yonder has been built up since then. Probably the whole of this Louisiana delta country, down from New Orleans, and perhaps even above it, was made in this way."

"Well, it's a strange world," said Ned. "Anyhow, I'm glad this marsh was made before I was born, so I could come and see it. But I do hope we'll find out where its goose headquarters is."

"Ah, here's the camp we're coming to around this bend," said the warden. "We'll soon know the best, or the worst."

"Goody!" shouted Jim, who was standing up on



the cabin. "I can see it, and there are men there. Isn't that fine!"

In about two jiffies the boat was at the landing, and the owner of the camp, a Creole hunter with a pleasant face, his eighteen-year-old son, and two other trappers, came out to greet them.

After the usual exchanges of courtesy, the warden told them that he was trying to show the strangers how much fowl they had in this part of the world, and especially geese, and asked if they were plenty outside of Main Pass.

"Not by Main Pass," said the man, "but off the next small pass, four miles north, I show you any quantity of them, geese, and ducks too. You think that all the fowl in the world come there for us fellows to shoot. The only trouble is you wardens won't let us shoot them fast enough. If you would, we get rich."

The boys fairly beamed at one another with delight, and went at their Saint Vitus' dance which took them when they were happy and excited.

"Are you sure," said the warden, "the fowl haven't moved off? Didn't you give them a big hammering?"

"Well," said the Creole, "they were there this morning, and we were so busy trapping we hardly shot at all. You can see we haven't such an awful lot of game in camp. We'll find them there all right,

and to-morrow, if you say so, I'll show them to the gentlemen."

Dad took him at his word, and it was a bargain. So they tied up at the landing for the night. After supper they enjoyed a merry swapping of yarns and jokes in the cabin. Finally, the Creoles went home, and, after getting their plates changed, the last man or boy of them turned in, at a not very late hour.

CHAPTER IX

PHOTOGRAPHING BLUE GEESE

THE next thing the boys knew somebody was calling. It roused them up out of the soundest kind of a sleep. By the pale moonlight they could see a face peering down the hatchway. It was Jean, the Creole hunter.

"All right, gentlemen," he said; "time to get up if you want geese to-day!"

Geese! That one magic word banished their sleepiness as thoroughly as though they had been dumped overboard. The captain immediately lighted the lantern, and they could see that it was half-past four. The sun would rise a little after seven, and they ought to be hidden in the blinds before that time.

After a hasty breakfast, Jean came aboard, and the *Mallard* was run some distance down Main Pass, and then headed into a smaller pass leading toward the north. Everywhere the water was shallow, and all along the warden had been sounding with an oar and giving directions to the engineer where to head. In spite of all his pains the keel dragged harder and

harder in the mud. The tide was low, and presently the *Mallard* stopped, unable to get any farther.

"No matter," said the warden, "it isn't very far now to the mouth of the pass. You sportsmen can paddle the rest of the way from here, and the engineer and I'll wait for you. By the time you get back the tide'll be in enough to float us."

The small boats used by the hunters of that country for their daily work are admirably adapted to the purpose. They are known as "pirogues," a French name, and are a sort of canoe, being long, light, and narrow. Some of them are dugouts, being made by hollowing out logs. Others are made of canvas. They all curve up a little at the ends on the bottom, and thus are able to slip through the grass or over the mud very easily. The hunter had his pirogue towing behind the power-boat, and, as he stepped into it, he invited Ned to join him, which Ned was much pleased to do. Jim and Dad took the skiff.

With the Creole paddling ahead as guide, they followed the right bank of the pass. It was now getting light, and they could see quite well anything that might show itself. Now and then a heron jumped from the marsh and went off squawking. Muskrats frequently plunged from the steep marshy side of the bayou into the water. Now and then a party of ducks dashed by overhead.

Quietly now they sounded the marshy point where

the bayou made out into the Gulf. There a great sight met the eyes of the party. Before them lay a wide area of flats and shallow water. For half a mile out the water was not deeper than one could easily wade with rubber boots, except that the bottom was rather soft and slippery, and it was quite a distance even to the nearest water. It was not the flats, though, that were of interest, but what was on them. They were fairly alive with a more astonishing assemblage of wildfowl than any of the visitors would have believed possible.

"Ducks, ducks, ducks, geese, geese, geese!" ejaculated Ned under his breath, and that was a very good description of what they saw.

"I didn't suppose there were as many as that on the whole Gulf coast!" cried Jim in rapturous tones. "Oh, but it's a great sight!"

It certainly was that. Straight before them, away out, swimming in the shallow water, was a squadron of ducks, great almost beyond belief. For at least a quarter of a mile there was almost a solid mass of them, and beyond that were flocks without number dotted about, as far as the eye could reach. The main bunch was in almost constant commotion. Parts of it would rise, with a roar of wings like thunder, and quickly drop again. Flocks from out beyond were every moment coming to the big mass, to swell its ranks.

Off to the right were the geese. On the edge

of the flats stood a great throng of them, which Dad estimated to be at least two thousand in number. Further out, on the water, was another division of about equal size. Four regiments of geese! The sight of them made the boys almost crazy with excitement. They must not jump and yell, and keeping in so much pent-up emotion made them feel as though they would explode.

As if to save them from such a fate, something else exploded. It was the two charges of powder in the Creole's double-barreled shotgun. They were as yet practically hidden by the point, and a fine bunch of canvas-backs, dashing by, offered a temptation too great to be resisted. Down came two of the great fat red-headed fellows on the flat, and the boys hurried to pick them up. At first Dad was sorry that Jean had fired, fearing that it would frighten away the wildfowl armies. But they were so far out, and the noise of their quackings, honkings and squawkings was so great that they paid no attention whatever to the shots.

"Now, I tell you," said the Creole, "what we better do. You see bunch of grass out there. That's my blind. You leave skiff here on the point, I take pirogue out to blind, you walk out to it, and we all hide. We get lots of birds to-day."

"First of all, though," suggested Dad, "Ned and I'll walk out on the flat and see how near we can get to the geese. We ought to get pictures of such

a wonderful mass, or nobody'll believe our story when we get back. It's so light out over the water that we'll use the back lenses of our doublets, and this ought to give us images of the geese big enough to show on the plates. If we can, they'll make wonderful pictures."

So Ned and Dad fixed their reflex cameras and set out to stalk the geese, squatting down as low as possible, one behind the other, Ned in advance. When they got within about two hundred yards the geese began to get uneasy, and then some began to fly.

"Now," exclaimed Dad, "stand up and give it to them!"

As they stood erect the whole flock arose with a roar of wings, and each hunter got in his silent shot.

"Hurry," said Dad, "change the plate, and give them another as they swing! Hurrah! Good work!" So well had Ned learned the technique of his camera, that his "gun" was loaded as quickly as Dad's, and again they blazed away, seeing the great cloud of geese clearly on the ground glass.

The geese were not out of range, yet they were so far off that they considered themselves safely out of the only kind of range they knew about, and were accommodating enough to alight again not much further on, this time on a long wide bar, separated from the flat by a narrow lane of water. Ned and Dad hurried on after them, and got in two more

shots apiece as good as the first ones, as the geese rose and settled still further out on the water.

"It's high time now," said Dad, "that we get to the blind. Just see how the bunches of fowl are flying over it already."

"But won't they see us and keep away?" inquired Ned anxiously.

"No," said Dad, "new birds are arriving all the time. Those hunters will blaze away from a stand all the morning, and yet the fowl will keep flying in to the decoys. They hear the hunter's duck-call and see the decoys, and pay no attention to anything else. That's how they slaughter them so."

The Creole and Jim had now reached the blind, and were anchoring out the wooden duck-decoys in front of it, so Dad and Ned walked out and joined them. The boys now learned how to make a blind on an open mud-flat. The hunters, some days before this, had cut down on the marsh a boat load of the tall canes or reeds, and had taken them out to the edge of the flat, some two hundred yards out from the marshy shore. They stuck them in the mud in two parallel lines, a little longer than the length of the boat and just far enough apart to allow the pirogue to be run in between them. The leaves drooped down over it and hid it perfectly. They had also made several other similar blinds, scattered about here and there. Since bunches of long grass grew out from the shore, looking very much like these

blinds, they deceived the fowl perfectly. Now the boys understood what had seemed so impossible that out on this wide flat anyone could get near these wary fowl.

All got in now under cover. Ned sat in the bow of the pirogue, Dad next, then Jim, while Jean sat on the stern deck. The hunter told the others that they were to have the advantage and take the first shots. When fowl were seen coming they must all keep down and sit perfectly still. When the birds were close on, they might raise up and fire, or even stand up, if necessary. He would do the same, and would only shoot after they had got through, and would look out not to fire too close to them. "You needn't be afraid," he told them, "they's plenty fowl; I get my bag-limit soon enough."

They had not waited five minutes before Jean began to sound his duck-call. "Get ready," he whispered, "there's fine flock north, coming straight!"

On they came, swift as a squall. The camera experts were not yet in training for this sort of work. The reeds were in the way and they could not focus. Before they knew what had happened the ducks were almost in their faces. Then, discovering the hunters, they broke ranks and made every effort to get out of the scrape. The Creole had waited, but, seeing that the cameras were not ready, he jumped up and fired at the retreating flock, and brought two spoon-bills down on the flat.

Jim wanted to go out and pick them up, but Jean told him to let them lie, as they would stay there safely, and they would pick them up, and more too, when they went in.

"We didn't work this right," said Dad. "I see now what we want to do. They seem to be flying mostly from the north. We must each make a little opening through the reeds on that side, just big enough for a clear view of the camera. If we cover up the brass-work with our brown focus-cloths, the fowl won't be likely to see it. Then we can keep the flock in focus as it comes, and blaze away when they get close in. Probably when they're in easy range they'll see us and turn, and that'll give us fine broadside pictures."

They did this, and found that the lenses now commanded a fine clear view.

"Whatever comes along now," said Ned, "is going to catch it."

They did not have to wait long for a further opportunity. "Honk, honk," rang out the distant sound of geese, from the north.

"I tell you," ejaculated the Creole, "you have fine shot this time. Look at the geese!"

The view that Ned now got almost upset his nerves. A big bunch of splendid geese, with loud cries, at a moderate height in the air, in a double line, spread out into a broad wedge, were headed right for them. Even Dad got excited too.

"Oh, oh," he whispered, with a thrill in his voice, "look at that, most of them with the white neck and head, *blue geese*, as I live! Here's what we've come away down here especially for. Keep cool now, don't get rattled and blunder. Keep a good focus, and wait till they get almost overhead. They're slow fliers, so we can stand up and shoot. Be sure not to get any reeds in the way, to spoil the picture."

The geese were now almost upon them, and loomed up so large that they looked twice as big as they really were. Ned would have snapped, had not Dad seized his arm.

"Wait, wait," he said, "a few seconds more. Now then, up and give it to them!"

The geese were nearly overhead and not high up, just right for the important shots. Indeed there were so many of them strung out one behind the other that there was not room for them all on the plates. Taking the most careful focus, Ned and Dad deftly made the shots, followed instantly by the Creole. The double-barrel roared out two shots. The ranks of the geese had two gaps made in them. Two of their number stopped their flight and descended like bullets toward the boat.

"Look out!" shouted Jim, "they're coming right on top of us. Duck your heads!"

With a rush and splash the heavy birds landed, not on their precious cameras, but right alongside the pirogue, just out of the blind.

"Ha!" cried Ned, "a miss is as good as a mile. But if those fellows had hit us, it would have been decidedly unpleasant."

"Look at those geese, boys!" exclaimed Dad. "What better proof do we need of what species our goose pictures are? Photographs of flying birds from underneath don't generally show much detail. But whether ours do or not there's no question but that we've photographed blue geese. I think, though, that these white necks'll show in the photographs. Anyhow, we've got the blue goose, but, mind you, we haven't finished with it yet. We want a good series of pictures showing it up in different kinds of haunts. And there's the question as to whether we are first or not, and can be the first to make it known to the scientific world. We know now that these 'rare' geese are here in immense numbers, so we evidently have discovered their winter habitat. As nearly as I can make out, most of the geese in those enormous flocks out yonder are blue geese. What kind of geese do you call those off there?" he asked, turning to the Creole.

"We call 'em brant," replied Jean, "white necks, gray, like ones I just shot," pointing to the dead ones beside the boat. "They different from big fellows,—Canada geese, you call 'em? Look there, here come some big geese, get ready!"

Sure enough, out over the water, but not hopelessly far, were six great Canadas, their long necks



"WAIT, WAIT," HE SAID, "A FEW SECONDS MORE."



stretched out, coming right past them. Discussing the blue geese so eagerly, they had almost forgotten that they were still in the game country.

Fortunately they had not forgotten to load up, and so were ready. The geese looked small but clear on the ground glass, and each of them got a shot as they went by.

"Well," exclaimed Dad, "that's fine! This time we made the cameras shoot further than the shotgun, because the geese are so big, but on smaller game it would be different. But I believe we'd better watch out sharp for game, and do our talking later. We haven't any duck pictures yet, and we certainly want a good supply of them. This is a fine chance to get them."

Again the Creole's duck-call sounded out. "Be ready, hit 'em this time," he whispered with a grin.

"Spoonbills again," murmured Dad, "and coming straight for us, too, low over the water. This time we'll keep them focused in the finder."

Knowing just what to do, each camera-hunter sighted his game, and held steadily on it with his weapon. Rapidly the images increased in size, then very rapidly. If they kept on, the ducks would almost brush their wings against the tops of the reeds that made the blind. At that instant the cameras whirled as the swiftly moving curtain-shutters fell, set for a speed of one-thousandth of a second. The ducks heard and saw, and sheered out over the

decoys. The Creole turned upon them, shot down one, and missed with the second barrel.

"I could got more than two if I fired quicker," he remarked, "but I want you get good pictures."

"You're a gentleman," Dad said to him, "and I'll make it all right with you. And, another thing, you're a fine shot. The way it looks so far, a duck or goose has a pretty slim chance if it comes within fifty yards of you."

"We shoot all time," said the Creole modestly. "My boy just good shot as I am. We kill very much game."

"Well, Ned, what's up?" asked Dad with a smile, as he noticed the boy rubbing and beating his hands.

"Wow, but it's cold!" replied Ned. "My hands are so numb, I can hardly manage my camera."

"Let me think," said Dad, "what boy was it that once thought it was always warm in the South, and even when he had learned better, this very morning, laughed at the idea of his needing gloves today? I've got gloves on, and even with them I'm none too warm."

"I wouldn't mind it," said Ned, "if the wind didn't blow so. I wasn't expecting that."

It certainly was rather uncomfortable to squat perfectly still out there in the early morning with a keen east wind blowing directly in from the sea and the mercury down nearly to frost-line. However, people who hunt wild geese have to expect that sort

of thing, and the boys were the last ones to think of complaining. Even if they had been almost frozen they would have been more than glad to be there.

"Qua-a-ck, quack, quack," suddenly was announced from behind them.

"Ready, now!" exclaimed the Creole, "a bunch of mallards coming!" and he plied his duck-call so noisily that Jim thought it would split his head.

From that direction it was impossible to turn around and sight them. The ducks were headed right for them, which really meant for the decoys, in the same line. Ned had the best chance now, because he was in front and had a clear view of the decoys with his camera.

"They'll come to the decoys," said Dad to him. "Focus on them, and snap when the ducks get near them."

Whirr came the ducks, right by the blind, almost within reach, a dozen of them, fine great birds, some of them with bright green heads. They set their wings, and dangled their legs to alight. Just then Ned snapped. Dad sprang up and took another over his head and instantly sat down, to give the gunner his chance. Of course this frightened the ducks, and they had just recovered themselves to dart away when the dead-shot Creole downed his pair as usual.

"That's the stuff!" cried Ned in a paroxysm of delight. "What a stunning chance that was for a

picture. Didn't those ducks look fine on the ground-glass, right over the decoys, holding their wings so still. I know I've got a wonderful picture!"

"Say, but that's a fine duck-call," observed Jim. "May I try it, before the next bunch comes?"

Jean passed it over, and Jim examined and tried it, as did Ned in turn. It was a simple arrangement, a small section of a bamboo fishing-pole, three or four inches long, with a reed or tongue arrangement in the middle, after the fashion of the reeds for a cabinet organ. Blowing into it would make it sound. Anybody could do that much, but the way the Creole worked it was a fine art. He could imitate the peculiar gruntings of each of the various kinds of ducks, some of which are very different from the familiar quacking of the mallard and the black duck.

"Give it to me quick!" suddenly exclaimed the Creole. "A little bunch of zin-zin. Maybe I get them."

Sure enough, three grayish ducks were approaching, but headed too far out. The boys did not know what they were, but Jean knew them and their language. Their note was a soft guttural whistle. According to Audubon, it seems to say "sweet, sweet," but the Creoles interpret it as "zin-zin." Jean certainly imitated it wonderfully. On whistling wings the three ducks changed their course and swung past the decoys, not attempting to alight, because the decoys were mostly painted for mallards. The cameras got

in their work, and then Jean picked off one with each barrel.

"What in the world are zin-zins?" inquired Ned of Dad, as the hunter named them to him.

"They are the baldpate, or American widgeon," replied Dad, "but I never heard that other name before. The French down here, I see, have an entirely original set of names for all the game birds. I've only learned a few of them. For instance, besides the zin-zin, they call the mallard the French duck, and the mud-hen or coot the poule d'eau. They don't understand our names any more than we do theirs."

With a sudden rush a compact flock of very small ducks darted over their heads from the rear, entirely unexpectedly. "Teal!" exclaimed Dad. They were too quick for the cameras, and nearly so for the gunner. They were rather far by the time he fired, but he dropped one of them out in the water, and presently it drifted in. It was a green-winged teal.

"We call him down here the winter teal," said Jean. "The other teal, with blue wings, he go South, come back in March. You ought to been here six week ago when they comes from North, thousands and thousands. One day we saw flock two miles long, sky all dark with them, great, great plenty!"

"Yes, we'd like to see them," remarked Dad,

"but we're doing pretty well as it is. There're as many ducks off here now as we need to see."

"Sure," replied the Creole, "but they not stay here always, they move along some day. But when they first come in fall they keep coming all time, plenty ducks every day. You ought see them."

"Well," said Dad, "we may get down here again some time, but I'm glad we're here now, and I know the boys are too. Aha! Here come the geese again. Listen!"

Sure enough, up in the air was another big flock, headed their way. Nothing could be done to call them down, as they had no goose decoys. The only thing was to lie still and let them come as near as they would. They took the same course as the other flock, but higher up, out of gun-range. The Creole knew enough not to waste his ammunition, though many a green-horn would have emptied his whole pump-gun magazine at them, they looked so large. Blue geese and white-fronts again, and by no means out of camera range. Indeed, it was just as well to have them a little farther away than before and be able to take in the whole flock. Standing up, when the flock was as near as it would come, the camera-hunters, scored each a fine shot apiece.

These incidents are only samples of what went on till ten o'clock in the morning. There were only a few more good chances at the geese, but the ducks flew thick and fast around them nearly all the time,

so much so that they lost nearly all track of the order of events. Dad tried to keep a record at first, but he would hardly get the notebook open before he would have to drop it and take a try with the camera at some new arrival, so he had to give it up.

One peculiar bird came along. It was brown and had a very straight bill, and would have gone by at a distance, had not Jean whistled and called it in to its fate. It was a great marbled godwit.

Long before this the Creole had shot down his limit, and had stopped. The photographic ammunition, too, was getting low, and there were many traps to tend that afternoon. All of the party hated to quit such sport as this, but there were other excitements to follow, and the fowl would probably stay here. So it was decided now to start back.

Before leaving, however, they wanted to get some pictures of the blind and decoys, the retrieving of the game, and so on, to show how the blue goose chase was managed. Just as they had opened and unlimbered the cameras, changing lenses from single to double again, preparing for this view work, so different from flying shots, they suddenly saw a regular army of blue geese and others advancing right upon them. They were caught off their guard, totally unprepared. Over their heads streamed the splendid geese, as the eager aspirants strained and sweated in vain to get ready. Even the Creole did not fire, for he had reached his full legal limit.

Right from the blind they had counted twenty-five dead birds on the flat, ready to be picked up.

"Oh, why didn't we hold on in the stand five minutes longer," sighed Ned, "and not lose the best shot of the day!"

"Never mind," said Dad, "cheer up. We haven't seen the last of the blue geese yet. I think that, from all accounts, in the western part of the State where we're going, we'll find as many geese as here, and perhaps find even better conditions for studying and photographing. It did look aggravating to see those geese get off so easily. Yet remember it's a great thing even to see them, something that we'll remember as long as we live. We've done grandly with the photographs. Besides, I really think we're going to come out first in the race for the blue geese. The warden told me that no one has ever come down here to study them."

Pulling the pirogue, now, out from the blind, Jean poled around and gathered up his game, after first taking in and stowing away the decoys. The boys took pictures of him as he did these things, and laughed to see how easily he could pole a boat over bare ground. It would slide over the slippery mud almost as easily as though it were water, while the rest of them mired and floundered. Indeed, Jim struck one especially soft spot, and sank till he was in danger of going in over the tops of his boots. He managed to extricate himself, and then, just as

everything seemed all right, he slipped and went down on his hands, getting his arms and sleeves plastered with that mean mud that doesn't let go. Luckily the camera was in the case, strapped over his shoulder. Ned had to poke all manner of fun at him, but he took it good-naturedly.

The twenty-five birds, with the decoys, made a good load for the pirogue. When they got back to the point they transferred most of it to the tender, and started back for the *Mallard*, stopping only to photograph a big black buzzard that was busy on the bank eating a dead fish that had drifted ashore and been left by the tide.

The *Mallard* lay a little further up stream, where the warden had run to make sure of having water enough. It didn't take long to reach her, and they started back for camp and dinner.

"I want to tell you," said Dad to the warden, "what a fine fellow our friend Jean is," turning to the Creole hunter. "A more expert hunter and obliging fellow, I never saw in all my life. And such virtue! Why, he let a whole raft of geese go right over his head and didn't shoot at them because he had already got his twenty-five. Do you suppose," he added, with a sly grin at the Creole, "he'd have been so good if you and the rest of us hadn't been around!"

"Jean's a good fellow all right," replied the warden, "and never gave me any trouble. I believe

he means to keep the law. I admit, though, it's a big test for a man when two hundred geese almost land on his head, when he's shot his bag-limit. It's a good safe thing not to get in too much temptation, isn't it, Jean?"

CHAPTER X

TRAPPING ON THE GREAT MARSH

HIGH noon found the entire company again at the hunters' camp, and everyone busy, the engineer with various things aboard the boat, Henri, the trapper's son, indoors getting dinner, while Dad was engaged with the warden and Jean in earnest conversation.

At the call to dinner they all assembled in the shanty, for Jean had invited them to try French cooking in a Creole hunting camp. That best sauce, hunger, was by no means lacking, yet even the poorest of appetites could hardly have failed to respond to the "great hit" of that remarkable meal. This was no less than a fricassee of mallard, or "French duck," with rice and sweet potatoes. The boys declared that they never would forget that "stew" as long as they lived.

"There's no need, I see," remarked Dad, "of asking you boys how you like Creole cooking, and whether you could manage to exist on it awhile. But I do want to ask you now what you think of this country down here. Are you sick and tired of it?"

Do you want to clear out this afternoon back to civilization, or would you feel content to stick it out awhile longer? "

" Well, I never! " exclaimed Ned. " What hard work you want to make it out having the bulliest time in our lives! Of course we want to stay here, just as long as we can."

" That's what I say, too," added Jim.

" All right then," said Dad, " we are all of one mind, and, seeing we are, I've got a plan to propose. It seems that the warden needs to go back home to attend to some business, and our friend Jean is to be here a little longer before they all pull out for their Christmas vacation. The other two hunters have left this morning, and Jean is kind enough to tell me that we are welcome to stay here as long as we like. If we wish, we can go back with him when he leaves, or, after he goes, if we want more hunting, we can stay ourselves, and have the warden come for us, sending word back by him to the warden when to call. He has a good stock of provisions, and there are plenty more on the boat which we can take. We can board with him, he says, if we're satisfied with Henri's cooking. You see he invited us in to-day to give us a sample. Well, how does it hit you? "

The boys seemed both to think of the same thing at the same time. They were sharing an empty box as a chair, and something surely did seem to hit

them. Anyhow the boys tried to leap up, in doing which they upset the box, and went sprawling on the floor. They were not hurt, though, but sprang up and made a rush for Jean. Dad almost thought that the Creole might pull his gun, not being used to such wild animals as the American boy. Whatever he might have done, there was no time to carry it out. The boys fairly jumped on him, threw their arms about him and gave him a regular old bear-hug, such as a bear of the Louisiana cane-brakes might be supposed to do.

Jean took it all in good part, and the boys proceeded to tell him that he was one of the best men that ever lived.

"I not know I was such fine fellow," said he, "but I glad if I am."

After dinner the warden let Jean and Henri bring out all their game, which he consented to deliver for them at their home, to be shipped up to New Orleans. It was some little bother, but it was by doing the hunters such little favors that the warden held their good will and made them more ready to help him in his work by obeying the law.

Before putting it aboard, as a matter of form, the warden and his helper made count of it, and Ned busied himself taking pictures of this interesting procedure, with the birds in pairs hung over the little fence around the shack. Then, with adieus, promising to return when wanted, the warden pulled in the

mooring, the *Mallard* darted from the landing, and in a few moments was out of sight.

They were now a lone company, in a lonely place, far from mankind, yet never a pang of loneliness came their way,— not yet!

"Oh, isn't this perfectly immense!" ejaculated Ned, as the full realization of where he was began to come home to him. "This is the biggest lark I ever had in my life. I tell you this is the way to enjoy a Christmas vacation. And those poor guys up home are still digging out Latin. Wow!"

"Hooray, too!" cried Jim. "And what are we going to do about it now? Say, Henri, what's the program this afternoon?"

"Why," said Henri, "first I go look after my muskrat traps up the bayou. Then I come back and take off skins. Father go to long line of mink traps."

"You want to see muskrat and mink too?" Jean asked the boys. They certainly did.

"All right," he answered, "go now with Henri. I do some work in camp and wait for you."

Pulling down a skiff from the bank, which would hold more boys and rats than the pirogue, the three jumped in and were off. The work began right away, for the line of traps began just above the camp. From the *Mallard*, as they had cruised along, the boys had seen many a little streamer of white rag, and had been told what they were for. Each one was tied to a reed on the edge of the muddy bank

which made off steep into the water. Close by was a small round steel trap set just below the surface of the water, with a chunk of the skinned carcass of a mink or muskrat tied to a reed just above it. The muskrat would see the bait, and try to crawl out on the bank to get it. The consequence was, as with awkward people generally, that it was likely to put its foot into it.

The very first trap they examined had a muskrat fast by the right fore foot, and drowned. The trap and rat were away under water, to the full length of the chain. As soon as the animal feels the grip of the trap, it leaps off the bank into deep water, and is held down and drowned by the weight of the trap. This is an excellent thing, much better than being left to suffer and die gradually. Trapping is a cruel thing at best, but, as long as people wear furs, it will continue. Even the most kindly boys, while they would not unnecessarily make an animal suffer, naturally look upon this as a matter of course, and a part of the world's work.

"Henri," said Ned, "how do you like being a trapper and living out here?"

"Pretty good," Henri replied, "but sometimes I get tired. We work so long, no time to play, no one to play with. Hunting good for awhile, but you hunt all the time, no fun."

"But you don't live on this marsh all the time, do you?"

"No," said Henri, "we come out here last October, stay till Christmas, go home a week, come back New Year, and stay till March or April. Hard work!"

"Yes," said Jim, "I suppose so, but it's great fun for us. We'd rather hunt than go to school."

"You're a lucky fellow," said Henri wistfully, "go to good school, get good learning. I go to school never. I can't read papers or write my name. I wish I go to your school, and you take my place!"

"I expect," said Ned, "that if we tried it, the way you do, we'd be glad to get back to school again."

The next trap had nothing in it, but the next beyond had caught one, this time by the hind foot. The muskrat had got almost out and was reaching up for the bait when it stepped into the cruel trap, and that was the end of it. The next trap also had a victim.

While Henri was gathering his pelts, Ned got his reflex camera ready and took some pictures of these trapping scenes.

"Do you know," he remarked to Henri, "I've read that the muskrat and the beaver are very much alike in their ways. The beaver's a shy fellow, and can't live anywhere near man. But here's the muskrat that lives in every pond and stream and we can't kill them off, no matter how hard people try."

"They plenty of 'em here," said Henri. "Why, I set traps in same place last week and half of them

had muskrats in. No matter how many you catch, always plenty more, same as to-day."

"The books say," Ned told him, "they raise three litters a year. No wonder they don't get thinned out much."

"Do you hunt muskrats up your country?" asked Henri.

"Yes," said Ned, "lots of people trap them. I never tried it myself, but I had a great time once trying for a picture of one. It was February, and so cold that the river was frozen over, except for some air-holes. I was out sleigh-riding, and saw a muskrat come up out of the water and crawl out on the ice with a root it was eating. Then it dove down and got another, and kept doing this. So when it made a dive I ran down and crawled out on the ice, with the camera, flat on my stomach. When the rat came up I kept perfectly still, and he didn't notice me. By and by I got within five feet, and he didn't mind as long as I kept still. But the instant I moved my hands to focus, he dove off in a hurry, and that was the last I saw of him."

"What do you think? All this time a man on the other bank was watching, and kept shouting, 'Get out of that!' I didn't pay any attention to him, till the muskrat cleared out. Then I got up and shouted back,—'Aren't you willing I should photograph a muskrat?' You just ought to have seen him! You could have knocked him over with

a feather. You couldn't imagine what was the trouble with him. He didn't see the rat at all, and thought some fellow was creeping to the edge of the thin ice to jump in and commit suicide!"

Henri laughed loudly at this adventure, and tried to match it. He told how one night he was asleep, and suddenly he jumped as though he had been shot at. For the life of him he didn't know what had struck him, only that his big toe hurt like blazes and was bleeding. The noise awoke his father, and he lit the lamp. Lo and behold, there was a big muskrat up in the corner of the room. Somehow it had crept in, to find a bite to eat, and thought the toe was the juiciest thing in the whole outfit. Henri couldn't see it just that way, so got a club and added the muskrat's pelt to his pile.

Of course Jim was good for a muskrat yarn,— of a winter morning, at home, when he opened the cellar door to go down and fix the furnace fire, to his amazement a good-sized brown animal leaped off the landing, right at his feet, and went tumbling heavily down the stairs, bounding like a ball from every step, and landing in a heap by the furnace, behind which it then hid. Jim killed it with the coal shovel, and found that it was a whopping big muskrat. The river, from which it probably came, was a third of a mile off, and Jim's home was on the main street of the town. How the animal got in he never knew, but apparently it must have crawled in under the

piazza and come through a break in the cement. They had apples and vegetables down there, and the poor muskrat evidently thought they smelt pretty good.

So, chatting away, the young fellows paddled along from trap to trap, averaging about a muskrat to every third or fourth one. As Henri was going home so soon and would not have time for another call on this route, he took up the traps. By the time he had rounded them all up he had quite a boat load. When they returned to the shanty the afternoon was nearly half gone, but there was still time for the mink route, and Jean was ready and waiting.

On this jaunt the whole party went, except Henri, who stayed to peel off the jackets of the muskrats. With Jean in the lead, they plunged back into the great marsh. Before they had gone twenty yards from the shanty, the boys found out that they had on hand a very different proposition from paddling along through open water in a boat. The tall grass, canes and reeds grew in strips and patches, with openings between them, but there were enough absolutely to impede the view. No sooner had they entered this marshy jungle than the shanty, and bayou, and everything familiar were as completely lost to sight as though they were miles away. There were no concrete sidewalks either. At each step they sank in from ankle to knee deep, and had to be

very careful all the time not to fall into boggy holes or pools and get in all over.

This whole wilderness is a wonderful mink country. It is astonishing how these trappers can keep catching minks as they do. In setting traps, they notice where the minks have made run-ways through the grass. They keep walking in a certain direction, and where they find a mink-run they place a trap in it, sunk just below the surface of the water, with a little *débris* over it to hide it, and staked down by a peg and chain. A piece of meat is tied to a reed or stem beside it, and overhead is put a white rag as a marker. It is easy to follow a trapper's trail through the grass, even though it is nearly as irregular as the wanderings of a butterfly. Various water-courses, small and large, are constantly heading one off. It makes little difference, though, how crooked the trail is, so long as it covers a large territory.

The region right around the shanty had been trapped pretty thoroughly, so the traps were now set further away, and they had to flounder through nearly a mile of the morass before they came to the first trap. This one was empty and the bait untouched, which was the case with the second and third. The fourth had been sprung, but evidently had caught the mink only by the toes, for the creature had pulled out, leaving only a little hair and blood behind. Another trap was empty.

As the minks are great travelers and cover quite a range in their wanderings, it is not good economy to set the traps too near together. To round up these five traps they had gone perhaps about half a mile. The boys were beginning to fear there would be nothing doing this afternoon, when, as they approached another streamer Jean exclaimed, "This time we got him!" Peering into the tangle, the boys saw a small slender yellowish-brown animal, with bright beady little eyes. Within the reach of the chain the grass was pretty well thrashed, for the mink is a tremendously active creature. When caught in a trap, it fights long and hard, and, when the hunter comes, it dies game. So now it began again a perfect storm of leaps and dashes, snapping angrily at the intruders, a striking exhibit of ferocity. The trapper carried a club, and with a hard blow on the head he put it out of business, but not before Ned had unlimbered his camera and, bending down some of the grass, had taken two snapshots of the animal.

"Isn't it a beauty!" said Dad admiringly, as the trapper held up the dead mink, tying a cord to its leg by which to carry it.

"Yes," said Jean, "it nice one, big fellow. It bring four dollar, so it make good day's work even if I get no more."

"This is the race known as the Louisiana mink," said Dad. "It's quite different from the northern

form, being a lighter brown, smaller and with thinner and poorer fur. The northern mink is very dark brown, almost black, and brings a higher price. It shows, though, how fur is in demand when even these southern pelts bring such high prices."

"How much do you get for muskrat skins?" inquired Ned.

"Fifteen to twenty-five cents," Jean answered. "But we get so many it pay well. The minks bring good price, more all time, two, three, four dollar apiece."

"Are these the only animals you trap out here?" asked Jim.

"Most all," said the trapper. "But now and then we get otter. When we do, it great day. They worth about twenty-five dollar. That too good come often!"

"I just wish he would get an otter while we are here," exclaimed Ned. "Wouldn't it be just immense if there was one in some trap now. I've read a lot about them, what terrible fighters they are. A good big otter would give us some excitement we wouldn't forget in a hurry."

They were walking on as they talked and had come to the next trap. Jean was a quiet fellow who was not in the habit of being noisy. But this time he let out an exclamation of excitement that created a stampede among his followers. It took them so by surprise they didn't know whether to advance or

run, or what! They stopped in their tracks, in blank astonishment.

"It's otter, a big otter!" cried Jean. "Look! Look!"

Coming up behind him, all saw, in an opening of the reeds, a most peculiar animal. In some ways it looked like a mink on a very large scale. The color though was somewhat different, a seal brown, somewhat reddish in hue. It had a hind foot in the trap, and stood there looking savagely at the party, watching for a chance to attack them.

"If you want picture, Ned," said Jean in a voice trembling with excitement, "get it quick before he fights. We kill him soon as we can. He awful strong, and trap small. Might break away."

Fortunately there was no grass in the way, and the otter stood over the trap so it didn't show. It was a rare chance for a picture of a most interesting animal, and Dad and Ned each took several, just as fast as they could change plates.

None of them except the trapper carried any club, and of course no good one could be found in the marsh. Jean got his stout stick ready, to attack the animal alone. The otter was a powerful fellow, four feet long, and, as all otters are, exceedingly fierce and agile. Being caught by a hind foot, he would not be impeded as though a front limb were held, and he could spring like a flash the full length of the chain. They are so tremendously quick and

powerful that under the excitement of an attack they are quite liable either to part the chain or tear out of the trap and get away. To lose this splendid creature when he almost had him would be a sad experience for Jean. So he resolved to kill him as quickly as possible.

The fight began with a powerful blow aimed by Jean at the otter. It landed mostly on the marsh, for the otter dodged, and quicker than thought, launched itself in fury at the aggressor. Being back the length of the chain as far from the enemy as possible, and with a yard of body to add in the bargain, it could advance further than the length of Jean's club, further than he thought. Before he could recover himself and dart back, the agile creature's teeth struck him on the back of the hand, giving him a severe cut which started to bleed profusely.

Snatching out his handkerchief, Jean twisted it around the injured member and started in to win at any cost. It was the most frightful exhibition of savagery that the boys had ever witnessed. The otter was a whirlwind of frenzy, leaping in every direction so swiftly that it seemed to be everywhere at once. Even though confined to that little circle, it seemed next to impossible to hit it effectively. The shower of blows, when they hit at all, glanced off with little effect. Under such tremendous jerks and strains neither chain nor flesh could stand the



"THE OTTER DODGED, AND . . . LAUNCHED ITSELF IN FURY AT
THE AGGRESSOR."

Abstract—The purpose of this study was to determine if there were differences in the prevalence of musculoskeletal disorders between two groups of nurses working in different departments of a hospital. The sample consisted of 100 nurses from the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) and 100 nurses from the General Ward. A questionnaire was used to collect data on demographic characteristics, work conditions, and musculoskeletal symptoms. The results showed that the prevalence of musculoskeletal disorders was higher among ICU nurses than among General Ward nurses. This suggests that the work environment in the ICU may contribute to a higher risk of developing musculoskeletal disorders.

strain for long. The animal was tearing off its foot. In a moment it would get away.

Jean saw the danger, and, aroused to a frenzy, became nearly as active as the otter. Laying aside caution, he rushed in to finish the creature. The otter got in another slash on Jean's leg, then tore out of the trap and made off for life and liberty. In despair Jean launched a parting, despairing blow. It landed on the otter's head, partly stunning it, so that it stumbled and floundered. This was Jean's opportunity. He struck it again and again, and the animal lay still. The trapper had won out.

Panting and bleeding Jean stood, there being no dry place on the marsh to sit down, while Dad helped him bind up his wounds, and the boys examined the otter.

"Wasn't that an awful struggle!" exclaimed Jim. "Why, I hadn't the remotest idea that an animal in a trap could put up such a fight!"

"Poor beast," said Ned, "he fought like a hero, and he deserved to live. I can't say I'm in love with trapping. Just think how it must feel to have one's foot jammed in the jaws of a trap, and wait there in misery for death. No trapping for me! It may be a good enough business, like butchering hogs, but it's no sport. It makes me see all the clearer that hunting with the camera is as clean and manly and interesting a sport as there is."

"What'll you do with the otter now?" asked

Dad. "You've got a long tramp to finish up your route, and I warrant the animal weighs twenty-five pounds. Besides, I believe you said you're going to pull up all your traps on the way back."

"Yes," said the trapper, "it'll make big load, sure enough."

"What do you say," went on Dad, "if I lug the otter back to camp for you now. I can follow the trail all right, and you and the boys can finish up and collect the traps. I've often been trapping before, and it's no novelty to me."

Jean was very grateful for this kind offer and accepted it. So Dad swung the big otter over his right shoulder, and, carrying his camera in the left hand, started back for camp, while the trapper and the boys pushed on. It was two miles further to the end of the route and they took three more minks. From the end of the line they retraced their steps picking up the traps, till when they arrived back at the first trap they had over fifty of them to lug, but each took his share, and many hands make light work.

Four minks to over fifty traps did not seem at first to the boys like much success. It would not be with muskrats, but when they came to figure out that these four mink skins were probably worth twelve dollars, it looked like a pretty good afternoon's work,—to say nothing of the otter! Mink are not as plentiful as muskrat, and, being so valuable, it pays to set plenty of traps, so that a mink,

wandering about, would be all the more liable to get caught.

As they approached camp again, at sundown, they could see that there were three men standing out in front, talking so intently that they did not notice the return of the party. Someone else had arrived; who could it be? It proved to be a Creole, a neighbor of Jean's at the settlement. In a few words he made known to Jean that his wife had been taken very ill, and hence he was needed at home at once.

This was bad news all around. What should the visitors do now? Should they give up their sport and go back immediately with the Creoles in their power-boat, or should they try to arrange to stay and run the camp themselves, going hunting on their own hook? Dad first put the question to the boys.

"Boys," said he, "in case Jean agrees to it, would you care, would you *dare*, stay down here with me on this great lonely marsh among the wild geese and ducks and minks, and we don't know what else, and try it for a few days, till the warden comes for us?"

"Would we!" cried Ned. "Well, I just guess! Wouldn't that be immense! Of course we would. Oh, please, *please* do!"

"Yes, yes," piped in Jim, "I do hope we can! What a time we'd have!"

"I'm certainly in for it," said Dad, "but it's up to Jean. This is his shanty. Well, Jean, what

do you say, could you trust us? I'm willing to pay you whatever's right."

"Certainly you can," answered the kind-hearted Creole. "I sorry to leave you, but you see how it is. I got go right back now. Henri go too; we need him help at home."

The messenger had arrived an hour before, so Henri had gone to work to get supper, and had put everything to rights, knowing that his father would want to eat and start right home. Supper was ready, so they all ate, with varied emotions. The boys, though sorry for the bad tidings to their friends, were delighted at the prospect of camping and running things to suit themselves, away out here on the wild Louisiana marsh.

Right after supper the Creoles were off in their power-boat in the dark. The gleam of their light soon disappeared up the turn of the pass, and the three adventurers were left alone in their glory.

CHAPTER XI

WILD-FOWLING IN THE STORM

THE plan for the next morning had been for another goose and duck hunt with Jean. Now that he had gone, it took but a moment to decide to carry out the plan themselves, with improvements. This time there would be no firing of guns, and if they should be able to get into the stand before light there would be absolutely nothing to alarm the fowl, since all the hunters had now left the marsh. Somewhat to the north of the blind they had used that morning, and further out, was another, which was nearer to where the vast concourse of ducks had resorted, and all of the party had remarked how, as the morning advanced, the fowl had utterly disregarded this clump of reeds, since no shooting had come from it.

"I tell you what, boys," said Dad, as they sat by the open fire of driftwood in the shanty, after the Creoles had departed, "I believe that if we can snuggle ourselves away in that blind by six o'clock to-morrow morning, we'll see some wonderful sights. My only fear is about the weather. The wind's

been blowing from the east these last two days. All day it's been clouding in with cirrus scud, and I'm sure we're in for a storm. I think we'd better turn in now, and in the morning we'll see how things look."

For a fact the bunks did look inviting, after such an active day. They felt as good as they looked, and all were asleep in a jiffy.

The alarm-clock aroused them at four, and they started up, to hear the rain beating against the shanty and the moaning of the wind.

"That dishes our photography to-day," remarked Ned. "What in the world shall we do with ourselves?"

"I'll tell you boys one good thing that I learned," said Dad, "when I used to go gunning, before I took to hunting with the camera. I learned that a wet day was a good day for ducks. So I would dress up in rubber or oil-skins, and go out all day on the coast in the biggest rain, chipper as you please, and keep as dry and warm as anyone need be. I had such interesting times that after I quit gunning I'd go out just the same to watch the fowl and enjoy the howling of the storm. I'd take the train and go down on Cape Cod to the exposed open coast, where I could watch the big breakers and the sea-birds driving before the gale. This morning I intend to see what's going on along-shore."

"Say, but won't that be great!" cried Ned. "Then we shan't have to poke indoors all day after

all. That'd be too slow for my blood. Jim agrees with me, too."

"You notice those oil-skins hanging up back there," continued Dad. "The hunters use them for just such days as this, and we can take them. They may be rather a loose fit for you boys, but that won't matter."

The boys started the fire, while Dad got out things to warm up, and soon they had hot cocoa, biscuits, canned baked beans and a can of peaches. Then they rigged up in the oiled suits and hats, and, with their long rubber boots, they were water-proof to anything in the line of rain. Of course, the cameras had to be left behind. At five o'clock they pulled down the larger of the two pirogues and paddled off. Dad wielded a paddle on one side, from the stern, while the boys worked further forward, the two paddling against Dad. Sometimes they would begin to pull him around, so they would slow up a bit.

It was a tough old pull, sure enough, and took all the boys' sand. The wind was strong, and dead against them, and it was so dark that they could hardly see the bank of the bayou except when they were about to run into it. The rain fairly stung them as it hit them in the face. Sheltered though they were by the land, the boat labored heavily in the chop, which was made worse by the heavy wind beating against the out-going tide.

By the time they reached the smaller pass into

which they turned, day had faintly begun to dawn, and they did not miss the turn. Now the water was smoother, and in under the steep east bank they made much better progress.

When they reached the entrance, conditions were very uncomfortable. For one thing, the wind had raised the tide, and the flats were pretty well covered. Had the water been deep there would have been a raging surf. But here the flats made out so far that the ocean swell was largely broken, though it was quite choppy. It certainly looked pretty black and dubious out there. Clearly it was impossible to lie in the blind away out on the extreme edge of the flat, if indeed the surf had not already washed it away. So they decided to try their old blind of yesterday, or the other one near by, whichever they first reached in the mist and darkness, for nothing in particular was then visible.

After some little paddling around, they ran upon what they thought was the other blind, a little further to the southward, just in from where the geese assembled yesterday. Pushing the boat in between the lines of reeds, they found that there was much more depth of water than yesterday for the boat to lie in, and more commotion, too. However, with the paddles thrust hard into the mud, they managed to hold the craft moderately steady, save for the rise and fall. Before settling down, they

had anchored two lines of decoys out to the windward.

Though it was now becoming quite light, the mist and the driving rain made it impossible to see very far. Yet they knew there was game near, for out beyond them they could hear the steady monotone of the confused gabbling of geese, together with the varied calls of ducks, and the frequent whistling of wings. All they could do now was to be patient.

“‘Learn to labor and to wait,’” quoted Dad. “You boys have learned the first part, and are pretty good workers. Now we’ll see what sort of waiters you are. Just remember that ‘patient waiters are no losers,’ especially with wildfowl. Just keep thinking of the game all the time, and the waiting will pass quickly. This night mist’ll burn off by and by, and then we’ll see some wonderful sights.”

It certainly was a strange experience, out there in a winter’s storm at daybreak, at the mouth of the Mississippi River, sitting there in a driving rain, a good test of the boys’ sporting blood. They proved game all right, and it wasn’t long before they began to be rewarded with some thrillers. The honking of geese sounded straight inshore from them, coming nearer. The fact was that the geese had spent the night feeding on the marshes, and now were coming out for safety on the open flats, and to get

sand on certain bars, just as they had done at Cat Island. Here, however, were far more geese, and, as luck would have it, the party had chosen a spot right in the line of flight and close to the goose amphitheater. Besides this, the wind, by raising the tide, to-day, would force the geese in nearer shore.

Dad had cautioned the boys, as there were no snapshots to be made, not to rise up to look at any passing flocks, but to lie low and keep perfectly still. So now, as they began to see the long line of geese headed right for them, all kept from showing even a single movement, and the geese felt no alarm or suspicion. That clump of reeds looked just like the others further in shore; it was simply the outer bunch of them all. Besides, it had been there for days, and they were well used to it. And so on they came, low down, making right for the concourse of those that had already arrived. Geese usually circle before alighting, when they come to a strange place or when there are no other geese on hand. But when plenty of geese and other fowl are already there, they lose all fear and abandon precaution. So now the party had the wonderful experience of seeing and studying wild geese under perfectly natural conditions.

With slow flight, directly against the strong wind, low over the flats, in preparation for alighting, the ranks of geese swept right over and past the blind. They were blue geese, too, that is, most of them,

with some of the white-fronted kind mixed in. Being so low down, even in this dull light, the watchers could see the difference between the two kinds. In voice, though, there did not seem to be any special difference between the various sorts of geese. Possibly the big Canada geese may have sung out more vigorously. Yet when those other geese went right over the boys' heads, honking for all they were worth, it sounded to them as though each one surely carried a megaphone.

So the flock passed them by, shouting their announcement to the bunch out on the bar beyond. The mist, fortunately, was lifting now, and they could see the flock dangle their legs and alight. It was not so very far away either, hardly two hundred yards, near enough to see them finely, as the light increased. By shielding their field-glasses from the rain they were able to make some use of them, and it seemed as though they were close to the flock.

It was only a short time before another flock announced its approach, and much the same thing again happened. Flock after flock came in and joined the assembly. Not all came directly over them, to be sure. Some came from further north, others from the south, but all of them gave the naturalists a splendid exhibition of their military tactics, showing all sorts of formations, lines, double lines, bunches, regular and irregular. It re-

minded the boys of their school military drill. Some companies did well, others needed more coaching.

The ducks, also, were not neglecting their visitors. Many a flock flew past them, or came to the decoys. Fine bunches of canvas-backs and of redheads flew close to them, though the decoys were not of the kind to induce them to stop, but what a sight it was! The stronger on-shore wind and comparatively thick weather brought the flight well inshore. Except for not being able to shoot with the camera, and the trivial discomfort of the rain, conditions could not have been more favorable for a most spectacular study of wildfowl. The boys were learning more to-day about this shy game than they could have done in years of ordinary conditions back at home. They would be able now to talk intelligently about all these wildfowl and to hold up their end with the old hunters, and experienced naturalists, even telling them of things they had never observed. Who of them, indeed, had ever studied *blue* geese in their haunts!

With noisy quackings a fine flock of about thirty mallards approached. Jean had loaned Ned his duck-call, upon which he had been practicing as diligently as upon his piano at home, under the Creole's personal instruction. Already he could make a pretty effective call. At any rate, now, it worked finely with the mallards. As nicely as anyone could ask,

while the hidden trio thrilled with excitement, the splendid ducks set their wings, dangled their legs, and alighted beside the decoys. Facing them, they trumpeted their friendly greetings, but got no response. It was so comical that the boys could hardly keep from laughing right out, the ducks seemed so surprised not to get any answer. They gazed in perplexity at the stupid blocks, and then, giving up the riddle, swam off.

The spoonbills, or shovellers, seemed to be especially tame little ducks. How they would keep flying up and alighting to those decoys! Getting no response from them they would fly off, and come back again. They looked very comical, the boys thought, with the ridiculous great horn spoon that each carried around on his face to dabble with on sandy bottoms. In the shallow water, right around the stand, acting just like tame ducks, they would tip up one end, and with tails sticking straight up, reach down and feed from the bottom.

Equally tame and comical were a flock of little ruddy ducks that swam in near the stand, not paying much heed to the decoys, but just happening along. They too have pretty good spoon bills, and their stiff little tails, each feather sharply pointed, which they hold more or less cocked up in the air, give them a quaint look,—a comical duck, the boys thought. Like the canvas-backs, the ruddies are div-

ing ducks. Though the water was so shallow, they could not help diving, just to pass away the time, as Ned put it.

As time went on the weather became worse and worse. The water was rising steadily, not altogether from the tide, but from the effect of the wind on shore. Before long the geese were forced off the sand-bar, which served in part as a break-water, preventing the water to leeward of it becoming too boisterous for them to swim in. As they floated off the bar they were not compelled to fly, but drifted with the wind right for the blind. Their purpose was to land on the nearest flat inshore, and, as luck would have it, the blind was directly in their line of march. They would surely have suspected any artificial-looking affair, but this clump of reeds looked so much like others further inshore that they paid no attention to it.

The delighted naturalists were now treated to the sight of a lifetime. A great mass of wild geese, surely two thousand of them, were swimming for them like a besieging army. As they closed in, the excitement of the party was extreme. Blue geese, white-fronted geese, and big Canada geese were there, but the blue geese made up surely three-quarters of the flock. With gracefully curved necks and the usual deliberate, dignified manner of geese, they swam past the stand on both sides, dividing their ranks to give it a reasonably wide berth of a few

rods. They gabbled and honked as they swam, and made a noisy, jolly company.

The boys and Dad were kneeling in the gathering water in the bottom of the pirogue, their faces down to the thwarts, motionless, peering from under their yellow oil-skin hats out through the chinks of the rushes. As long as they could refrain from any sudden motion, change of position, or sneezing, their concealment was perfect. They did not dare to turn their bodies as the geese were passing, but they did venture, very carefully, to move their heads, without being detected. When the flock got by, with great care they wormed their bodies around, and watched the retreating geese. Before they had had a fine front view, and now it was equally good from the rear.

The flat for which the geese were headed was only about fifty yards to leeward. The wavelets were lapping it rather roughly, but the geese, as they arrived, scrambled ashore, and watched the coming of their fellows. It was a quiet but wonderful scene. Many were preening their feathers, others were swallowing sand, or playfully running their bills through it in hope of discovering some shell-fish or other.

"The gunners would say — what a shot!" whispered Dad, "but we say — what a *sight*! It's as wonderful a thing as we shall ever witness in our lives. It would seem like murder, wouldn't it, to shoot into

that flock? And *blue* geese, too! Here are the rare birds of our chase, think of it, fifteen hundred or so of them, and we've been right in the middle of them. By the time we get home we'll probably know more from experience about the habits of the blue goose than any other living naturalists.

"I don't want to kill them," whispered back Ned, "but isn't it dreadful to have to lose such chances for pictures. It just makes me wild because we didn't bring some sort of a camera."

"Yes," said Dad, "if I'd had the ghost of an idea that we should have the geese sitting still so near us, I'd certainly have brought the small camera wrapped up in the rubber cloth. We could have opened it under cover, and tried some slow snaps. But it mightn't have done any good, for it's so dark and wet, and the boat jumps so we couldn't make any time-exposures."

They watched the geese and ducks for an hour more. Other flocks of geese came in now and then and alighted among the big company, while some bands also took their departure. A bunch would gather together in line, stretch up their necks, and honk excitedly. Then the leader would give his signal, and, with a tremendous outcry, they would all, at just about the same instant, spring into the air and away they would go.

It was wonderfully interesting, but rather chilling work to squat there in the rain so long. Ducks

were still flying and geese were coming, but all things had to end some time. The water, too, was now rising fast, and it was hard to hold the boat in place.

"Well, boys," said Dad, "I suppose we'd better make a break and get back to camp. It's going to be terribly rough out here, and the pirogue isn't built for an ocean voyage. But what a commotion we'll make! Raise up carefully, pull up the paddles and let the boat drift toward them."

Each one grasped his paddle, worked it about to loosen it, and drew it from the mud. The boat quickly slid out from the rushes, but so quietly that at first the geese didn't catch on. But before they had gone many feet they were observed. Some gander gave a cry of alarm. Instantly all were attention and saw their danger. There was no waiting to form any orderly ranks. Every pair of the thousands of great wings were raised, and with the wildest honking, amid utter confusion, the great assemblage was in the air in a mighty cloud. They had to rise to windward, towards the boat, but no sooner were they well started than they swung off to southward, and soon the cloud of geese was lost in the cloud of rain and mist. Their rising was like that of the day before, but far more impressive because so near.

Now the paddles were again put in action, and the party soon found that they had their work cut out for them. To reach the entrance of the pass

they had to paddle northward for some distance, broadside to wind and wave. They were soon out from under the lee of the bar where the geese had first rested, and it proved to be so rough that it was all they could do to keep the pirogue right side up. Every now and then a wave would slop over the starboard side, and Jim had to stop paddling and bail as hard as he could.

Now they were opposite the mouth of the pass, the critical spot. Even though the tide was now running in with the wind, it was very bad. Had the surf not been so heavy on the point, Dad would have decided to push ashore and drag the boat around. As it was they must try to paddle in. No doubt the Creoles could have done it all right, but the boys did not realize what a ticklish craft a pirogue is, even one as large as that they were in. As they turned the craft to head into the bayou a heavy puff of wind and a bad breaking wave struck them at the same time. The pirogue listed badly and took in considerable water. Involuntarily the boys jumped, which was enough to upset the boat completely. She rolled over bottom side up, and all were in the water.

It was especially bad because all were impeded with long boots and oil-skins, and, besides, just here they were in deep water. Though generally so shallow, the tide was well up, the gale was rapidly raising the whole level of the water, and they hap-

pened to be in the channel, such as it was. Luckily all could swim, and, coming up like corks, they all had hold of the pirogue. The boys were considerably agitated, but Dad kept their courage up.

"We'll be all safe in a few minutes!" he assured them. "The tide and wind'll soon set us ashore. Don't get nervous. Just tread water and hold on the pirogue. It won't bear the whole weight of all of us, but it'll help. We'll soon touch bottom, and wade in. And hold on to your paddles, for we'll need them."

"We're good for it," said Ned, "never fear!"

The water was pretty cold, but it did not seem colder to them than in summer along the coast of Maine, and they could stand it quite a while. They drifted in rapidly, and in a few minutes Dad's feet touched. He dragged the boat a bit, and the boys, too, were aground. Taking hold with a will, they pushed her along, and presently ran her in around the point, landing under lee on the marshy bank.

"I feel as heavy as a lead pipe, with all this water!" grumbled Ned.

"Ugh, but it's cold!" ejaculated Jim, as the east wind struck in.

"Peel off, everybody!" cried Dad. "Empty out your boots, and wring some of the water out of your clothes. Hustle hard, so you won't get chilled through. But first drag up the boat a little."

In a remarkably short time all had undressed and

dressed, and got rid of much of the extra water. Then they emptied out the pirogue, shoved her off, and put in hard licks with the paddles so as to get warmed up. Nature responded nobly, and before very long they felt warmer than they had when they were watching the geese.

"It's a great thing to be sound and healthy," remarked Dad, as they proceeded along making the pirogue fly under their sturdy strokes, and with the driving wind and tide to help them. "If one is thoroughly sound, the system will respond to vigorous exercise. But a person with a weak heart mightn't be able to rally."

"This won't hurt us a bit," said Ned, "and maybe it'll do us good. It may teach us a lesson."

"Yes," said Dad, "and a very important lesson. Not to learn it might some time cost you your lives. Always remember, as long as you live, when a small boat is in a rough sea, or in danger, never, *never* jump or stand up. Doing this has cost a great many lives."

"I'll never forget," said Ned, "one time when Dad and Mother and I were crossing a channel in a dory, up in Nova Scotia, when I was a little boy. There was another lady in the boat too, and it was pretty well loaded down to the water's edge. It wasn't rough, and was safe enough if everyone kept still. Somehow, though, the lady got scared, and up she hopped, exclaiming how dangerous it was.

Dad just yelled at her two little words — SIT DOWN! She did sit down for a fact, as quick as though she'd been shot. Everything was all right then, but she might have upset us easily."

"Yes," said Dad, "I remember that very well, and you must remember not to get excited in danger, but to keep cool and do the proper thing."

The pirogue made rapid progress, and in due time they were back at the shanty. A roaring fire was soon going, and with a change of clothes, a good dinner, and the wet things hung up to dry, they were comfortable, happy and safe,— for awhile!

CHAPTER XII

PRISONERS OF THE HURRICANE

IT was well that they returned when they did. The wind was increasing all the time, and by afternoon had become a heavy gale. The driving rain beat furiously against the shanty. Out on the marsh the brown cane and grass bent prostrate before its onslaught. It was now high tide,—and such a tide! Ordinarily the water reached well up on the bank of the bayou, and, at the very most, overflowed a little upon the marsh, over the roots of the grass. Now it was fairly up over the banks, and so deep upon the marsh that in the open places the shorter grass was no longer visible. Lakelets were forming and increasing in size. The bayou was disappearing. The whole region was getting to look like the western prairie sloughs,—shallow lakes, with clumps of grass or reeds growing from the water.

As yet, however, Dad felt no apprehension for their safety. The usual season was past when the autumnal tropical hurricanes devastate the coast, raise the sea over the low country, and drown or starve out the inhabitants. There had been one

such about six weeks before this, which was supposed to be the last of the season. It was now time for high tide, and with the ebb the waters would surely fall.

After the wetting of the morning the boys felt that they had had enough, and were well content to remain indoors. From the two small windows they could comfortably watch the raging of the elements, and see the tide creep higher and higher.

"Isn't this just great!" exclaimed Ned. "It gives a fellow such a queer feeling to watch the storm and think how far off we are from anywhere. Not a person within miles and miles of us. It's almost like having the world to ourselves. We can't get to anyone, and they can't get to us. So here we are! But we've got grub enough to last as long as we need, so we're all right."

Jim looked a little dubious. "I'm not so sure about that," he said. "Suppose the sea rises and drowns us out, what in the world could we do?"


"Oh, no," laughed Ned, "it won't do that so late in the season. It won't be any worse than this, and probably the *Mallard*'ll come back for us tomorrow."

"That's your theory," replied Jim, "but how do you know? There are bad storms in winter, too. Perhaps they don't set the sea as far back inland as the fall hurricanes do, away back into the swamps. But you know we're away down at the jumping-off

place, and this new land is hardly above the sea level yet. I wish the boat would come and take us out of it."

"It's no use to wish that," said Dad, "for it's blowing too hard for any boat to get here from the westward, with the wind right dead ahead. Besides, the warden wouldn't know about the Creole's being called away. He thinks we're safe with them and could run back to leeward in their powerboat if we needed to. So he wouldn't think there was any need of risking his life to come after us till the storm had let up. Anyhow, the shanty is built up some on posts, and there isn't the ghost of a chance that the sea'll rise high enough to carry it off."

Jim was satisfied, and soon recovered his usual spirits. The afternoon indoors was really needed, for with so much happening all the time, all of them had got badly behind with writing up their notes. Following Dad's advice and example, from the time when the boys had begun their nature-studies, each of them had adopted a system of recording observations about birds, animals, or anything of scientific interest outdoors. For brief memoranda afield each carried a little manila order-book, and jotted down things they might forget. For one thing they always made a list of the kinds of birds seen on each day's jaunt, writing down the name of each one as soon as they saw it, to make sure of being accurate.



These daily lists, reaching back through years, were of real scientific value, as well as being very interesting for comparison. After a tramp it was most delightful to look up what they had seen on the same date in past seasons.

Beside these brief field-notes they also kept a full journal, writing out a pleasant account of each day's observations. This made fascinating reading afterwards, and also had been a wonderful help to the boys in gaining a good English style. Already, through practice, they had become the best writers in their class at school, and were never at a loss for something interesting and original to write about when compositions were required. Who could tell but what they were in training some day to become accurate scientists and famous authors!

So, during the afternoon they finished up their field-notes, especially those for the morning, because, owing to the rain, they had not been able to make a single record. This part they could do in pencil. But when it came to the Journal, which was meant to last, to be read in later years, or by generations after them, they got out their fountain pens from the bag. Before the light failed they had made good progress, and were in sight of getting caught up to date.

Contrary to expectations the time of ebbing tide did not make any lowering of the waters. The fact is that here in the Gulf of Mexico the rise and fall of tide is comparatively slight, only three or

four feet, and the force of the gale, directly on shore, was enough to pile up more water than the difference between high and low tide. All the effect of the tide seemed to be lost, so it was high tide at low tide, and much more.

As darkness closed in, the flood was well up around the shanty. The whole marsh was pretty deeply under water, and the water was steadily creeping up the piles on which the shanty rested. Long before this Dad had put on again his wet rubber boots and waded out to make everything ship-shape to weather the storm and tide. All loose articles in the shed were brought indoors. The anchors of the small boats were lifted and they were fastened where they could be reached in case of possible need.

Besides wood to warm them up there was plenty of fuel for the oil-stove, and provisions enough for some days. They could stand quite a siege, if only the shanty was not overwhelmed and carried away. Dad was now more anxious than he would admit, but he did not want to alarm the boys. So he laughed and joked with them as they prepared and ate supper, and they had a jolly evening. Various games were in order, and soon the time arrived to turn in.

"Say, Dad," said Ned, from his bunk, "before we go to sleep tell us some stories, won't you?"

"Why," said Dad, "we're making story all the

time down here, just as interesting as any I know. Surely you don't need any more!"

"Oh, yes, we do!" piped in Jim. "I want to hear about that gale down here last month, the one that filled up the street at Pass Christian. You said you read a lot about it in the papers."

"Come off, you boys!" said Dad rather mockingly. "You don't want to hear about these dreadful storms down here. Why, we're out in a storm this very minute, and you'll get in an awful stew and won't sleep all night."

"No, we won't either," said Ned, taking up the defense of their courage. "We aren't cowards. Dear me, suppose the old shanty does blow off the posts and go sailing away! We'll get up on top of it and ride over to the old Mississippi River in fine style, and there'll be vessels to rescue us. Why, I almost wish the old thing would go by the board!"

"No," said Dad, "we don't wish that, because we'd have all our cameras and notes and the fine pictures we've taken spoiled by the water, and be cold and wet and hungry no one knows how long. That wouldn't be any fun at all. I think the storm'll moderate by morning. But I'm glad you're brave, so I'll tell you a little of what I read about the November hurricane.

"Well, it was so bad that all along the coast of Louisiana, which is very low, clear away inland,

the water set back miles and miles, and caught a lot of people like rats in the trap. There were hunters, oystermen, plantation owners, negro laborers, scattered through the low country. Before they knew it the water had risen up over everything, and kept on rising, till it drowned cattle in the barns, and drove people up to the second stories of their houses. A good many, though, have only one-story cabins, and these had to get up on the roofs, or in the lofts inside.

"Then the water got high enough to float the houses off. There was a terrible wind and a strong tide, and it turned the houses over and whirled them off, drowning most of the people in them. Many places were so lonely that those who managed to cling on top of the floating buildings, or were imprisoned by the water when the buildings did not float off, suffered terribly from hunger. Animals in the barns were standing up to their necks in water and starving.

"Just as soon as possible, relief parties went out in boats to hunt for flood sufferers. I read that one of these parties, in a power-boat, went running past a swamp and heard a strange cry, like some wild animal in pain. They went in to look and found a poor little baby boy tied up in a tree, and no one else around. Probably the father had swum with it there, and then had left it to try to get food, and had been drowned. There was awful suffering. A

good many dead bodies were found, and others disappeared and were never found or heard of. Out on this open marsh it must have been terrible."

"Well, then," asked Ned, "why wasn't this shanty washed away?"

"I suppose," said Dad, "that down here where it's so much exposed, they take lots of pains to raise them on piles and spike them down as strongly as possible. They expect just such danger every fall. But back in the swamps, where they seldom feel the storms, people get careless and build their houses in flimsy style. It's so warm down here most of the year they don't need very much of a building to keep them fairly comfortable, and a good many are poor and ignorant, and lazy too. They wouldn't take the trouble to build proper houses even though it might save their lives. Speaking of this shanty, seeing that it stood the last gale, there's little fear but that it'll stand this one. Now I think I've told you enough, so you boys turn over and go to sleep, and in the morning we'll see where we're at."

Every day the boys had found enough work and excitement to make them feel good and tired, and the one just closing was certainly no exception. They slept like logs, as free from care as though they were in their own beds at home. Dad, however, could not take things so easily. The responsibility was his, and he realized that they were in a dangerous predicament, and that before long they might have to

face the greatest peril and hardship of their lives. The noise of the storm was steadily increasing. It was what they call on the coast a regular old snorter. How the wind did howl and the rising waves churn as they passed.

As the night went on Dad could hear the waves begin to hit the shanty. Getting up, he found that the water was beginning to trickle in on the floor. This was only the slop of the waves, but it showed what might happen if this kept on. There was nothing on the floor to be hurt by a little water, so, as he was powerless and it would do no good to wake the boys, he went back to bed and waited to see what would happen.

The noise of the water steadily became worse, and after another hour it really began to flow in on the floor. The waves hitting the floor-boards from underneath made such a noise and jar that it woke the boys. Dad told them to lie still while he got up and lighted the lantern. The water was all over the floor. With the wind shrieking and the waves pounding mercilessly against the side of the shanty, the conditions were far from encouraging. The boys now felt really frightened, and looked at one another aghast.

Just then there came a great crash and shock, and the shanty trembled as though it were about to collapse or be carried off its foundations. Even Dad was now thoroughly alarmed. Then came bumping

and grinding sounds, and Dad surmised what had happened. Some heavy timber or structure adrift had been driven by the gale against the shanty. It might be a boat, or a shed, or the deck-load washed from some vessel in distress. At any rate, the blow had been delivered, the shanty was not crushed or torn from its fastenings, and they were still safe.

"My dear boys," said Dad encouragingly, "don't get alarmed; keep up your courage. This collision shows that the shanty's very solid and can stand a lot of punishment. Even if the water is up partly over us we can weather it out. The grub's up on the shelves, out of the water. If it gets very bad we can take everything up in the bunks, oil stove and all. We'll eat and sleep and hibernate like woodchucks till the southern sunshine gets back after the storm. Then the *Mallard*'ll come and we'll have a chance to get out and stretch ourselves. At the same time, in case that anything *should* happen, I think we'd better dress and be all ready."

So they all dressed in the bunks, just as though they were in a sleeping-car, and lay down, though not to sleep. The lantern was lighted, and they could watch the rising water, as well as listen to the onslaughts of wind and wave. It was not a very cheering condition of affairs, but there was nothing to do but to make the best of it.

It seemed as though the night would never come to an end, but at last it began to grow light. Even

then there was not much to see from the windows, only mist and a dreary expanse of tossing water, the tops of reeds still showing. The floor of the shanty was still solid, though the water was knee deep on it.

"It's too bad," said Dad, "that this shanty wasn't put on higher posts. The oystermen further up the river build their houses so high that this much tide wouldn't reach them at all. They're warm and comfortable now, while we've got to live like muskrats. The Malay shrimp fishermen down in Barataria Bay, who are descended from the followers of La Fitte, the pirate, have a village away up on stilts, they say, because they know how dangerous these storm-tides are."

"I say," broke in Ned, "if I'm going to drown, I'd rather do it on a full stomach than starving. I vote we have breakfast!"

"So do I," said Jim enthusiastically. "I don't want to fight on an empty stomach."

"It's a good thing you boys aren't too much scared to eat," said Dad. "Come on, then, let's go in wading for breakfast!"

Sure enough, it was a queer kitchen and dining-room. The water was almost up to the top of the table, and their chairs, or rather the boxes which they used as such, were drifting foolishly around the room. The oil-stove had been set up in an empty bunk, and there they did the cooking. Jim set the table, and Dad got out the food, and Ned did the

cooking, at his own request, such as there was to do. He made a big pot of hot chocolate, and warmed a can of baked beans, while Dad opened a can of tongue, a box of dry cereal, and a can of cream, and brought out a plentiful supply of crackers and butter.

"Breakfast is now ready in the diner; first call to breakfast!" announced Ned.

Everyone came to the first table, where the viands were so invitingly spread. It looked so funny to be standing knee-deep in water at the breakfast table that they all shouted with laughter, as they pitched in to the attack.

"This is a quick-lunch counter," said Jim jokingly. "You see, the train's liable to arrive any minute, so we can't take time to sit down in civilized fashion. If the old shanty rolls over and starts out on its voyage we're all ready to up and get!"

"I hope, though," said Ned, "that it'll stand just a few minutes longer till we get filled up. I think we'd better eat a big pile, because we may not get any more in a long time."

"You don't want to eat enough to sink you," said Dad, "in case you're thrown overboard!"

"Why, no," returned Ned, "but this flaked cereal wouldn't sink us. It acts like cork in a life preserver. We'd better eat a lot of it, and then we can't possibly sink."

"I don't see much danger of you boys sinking,

anyhow," said Dad. "Your cheerful spirits would buoy you up. There's good stuff in you all right."

"It's a lot better," joined in Jim, "than keeping a stiff upper lip. I tried that when I had an ulcerated tooth, and I didn't like it one little bit."

"Come off there!" said Ned, pretending to scowl; "you're getting too funny altogether. Such levity at this solemn time is very bad,—don't you know?"

"No," said Dad, "we don't know any such thing. I don't believe we're going to drown, but even if we were we wouldn't be any more prepared to go by putting on long faces. We pray night and morning, and, if I may say it to you, you're good clean, upright manly boys, who try to do right. That sort of thing is the only kind of preparation for the hereafter that's worth anything. These people of mean character and foul tongues who cry and pray in the storm when they're in danger, are just as mean as ever when the weather clears. I think a good square meal and our ordinary morning prayer is all the preparation that we need to make for the day, whatever it brings."

"Well," said Ned, "I've done both, and I'm just stuffed full. I suppose we'd better wash the dishes and have them ready for dinner. Say, but we shan't need to go far for dish water, shall we?"

"That's so!" laughed Dad. "Still, I think we may as well heat some of this brackish water and wash them in the pan. It'll take the grease off bet-



"IT LOOKED SO FUNNY TO BE STANDING KNEE DEEP IN WATER
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ter, and then we can throw it outside and not have any grease floating around."

"Do you think," asked Jim, "that it blows quite as hard as it did an hour ago?"

"No," said Dad, "I really think that we've passed through the worst of it. In that case the shanty certainly won't go, and all we'll have to do is to wait for the warden to come to our rescue. Of course, he'll do it at the earliest possible moment."

"What shall we do to-day?" inquired Ned. "I hope the time won't hang too heavy on our hands."

"I think we can find plenty to make things interesting," said Dad. "For one thing we'd better finish up our journals, and get up to date. Let's see which of you boys can write up the best account of this storm. Then, I have Chapman's Handbook of Birds with me. Let's study up the birds of Louisiana, and see what kinds we ought to find here in winter. Besides this, it'll be a good time to talk over our future plans. We've been so busy so far there hasn't been much time to think of anything else."

"Oh, Dad!" cried Ned. "Let's have the plans first. I'm awfully anxious to know what we're going to do next."

"All right," said Dad; "here goes then. I suppose the first question is to be whether you've had enough of it and want to go home, now that we've learned so much about the blue geese and got some

pictures of them. It's so dangerous down here on this Louisiana coast that perhaps we'd better get out before we have another chance to get drowned!"

"Now, Dad," pleaded Ned, "please don't try to tease us fellows. You know perfectly well we don't want to go home. We'll stay just as long as we can,—all winter, if you'll let us."

"I don't know where your education would come in," said Dad, "if you stayed that long. However, I don't think it'll hurt you to have a little more, and I know I want some myself. Now, you know I've mentioned Western Louisiana to you. What I want to do is to get back in Vermilion Parish, down the bayous and along the Gulf coast. They say it's a wonderful region, quite different from this, and yet with immense numbers of ducks and geese. It's more of a timbered country there, and the fowl feed in the ponds, where it's easier to get at them, and we can study them under different conditions. Perhaps we can get even better pictures, and some new kinds as well."

"How about the blue geese?" asked Ned. "Shall we find them there, too?"

"I was just going to tell you," said Dad, "that I'm confident we'll find them and have some very interesting times. We need to photograph them some more, and study them in this other sort of country. Then we can hope to do the thing up brown, and make a great success of it."

"Do you know just where to go?" asked Jim.

"Not exactly," said Dad. "We go back to New Orleans, though, and take the Southern Pacific train out through the country where the Acadians settled, the people that Longfellow tells of in 'Evangeline.' Beyond there we'll meet a game warden and go with him down the bayous in a power-boat. He probably knows just where the best places are for wildfowl. Besides, there'll probably be some other sorts of game there, too."

The boys thought this was a perfectly dandy plan, and talked it over awhile. Then all got out their journals and notebooks, and got busy in their bunks, using some boxes for tables. After this they got out the bird book, and went over the ranges of the various birds, writing out the list of Louisiana winter birds. Then they had an interesting time checking off on the list the various kinds they had already seen.

It was surprising how, to busy minds, the time just flew away. The first thing they knew it was time to get dinner. Though it was still blowing quite hard, it was nothing like what it had been during the night, and the wind had veered to the southward. The water was falling rapidly, and there was only a little on the floor. The rain, too, had nearly stopped. They had opened the door and looked out, but the shanty faced south and the disagreeable drizzle beat in, so they were glad to shut it.

After dinner they went to work again at their notes and finished them up to date. By this time they began to feel restless. The water had gone down below the level of the floor, so they played some active games, boxed and wrestled, trying to work off some of their extra steam. Such lively boys needed a larger sphere for their activities than a little trapper's shanty! They felt as though the whole big State of Louisiana was none too big for them. Now and then they looked out to see if somebody might not be coming.

Well along in the afternoon, in the midst of a frolic, suddenly everyone, with a start, sat up and took notice. A sound came to their ears which was different from the moaning of the wind. Could it be the "chug-chug" of a power-boat? They listened intently. Surely it was. Then there was a general rush for the door. Yes, they could hear it plainly now, and presently the familiar form of the *Mallard* began to loom up through the mist.

To the tune of cheers and the waving of hats she ran down the bayou and anchored abreast of the shanty, as the wind was directly on shore and it was too rough to come to the slightly submerged bank. In a jiffy the warden had jumped into the tender and was on the little pier, where, ankle-deep, the prisoners of the hurricane awaited him. It was a scene of hand-shaking and friendly congratulations.

"Maybe I'm not glad to see you all safe and

sound!" said the warden. "My, but we've been scared about you! Jean doesn't live so very near us. He got back late the night before last, and we never heard till last night that he'd left you alone out here with that storm coming on. He ought to have let me know right away, but his wife was almost dying, and the poor fellow couldn't think of anything else. When I did hear at last, the storm was so bad that no boat could possibly have run out against it. We had to wait till morning, and we started out just as soon as it began to let up. Even now we had hard work to drive the *Mallard* over, but we're here, the engineer and I, and I tell you we're glad to see you. If anything had happened, I never could have forgiven myself for leaving you. Now, I reckon you've had enough of that shanty for awhile. I'll help you bring your things, and we'll go aboard and get you back to a more decent place to stay. Even on the *Mallard* we can keep you pretty comfortable."

"The shanty does well enough for awhile in good weather," said Ned, "but we fellows are sick and tired of living in a muskrat house and swimming to our meals. We shan't shed any tears over leaving it."

It was the work of but a few minutes to get their belongings together, get aboard the *Mallard*, and greet the engineer. The boys helped raise the anchor. As they started off Ned proposed three

cheers and a tiger for Creole Jean, his shanty, and the blue geese, which were given with a will.

There was little to see on the way back, as the weather was still quite thick, only water and marsh, and a few passing flocks of ducks. After a run of some twenty-odd miles, through rough choppy water, particularly when they reached the swollen Mississippi, whose mighty tide, bucking against the strong wind, aroused much commotion, they were glad to find themselves, at dusk, again under the hospitable roof of the Creole orange-planter.

CHAPTER XIII

THROUGH THE ACADIAN COUNTRY

BEFORE starting along on their journey for further adventures, it was decided to remain over another day with the orange-planter. For this there were reasons in plenty, the most urgent of which was that, owing to the storm and flood, the river steamboats were not running. Besides they needed to get their clothes dried and aired. It was very interesting, too, to see more of how the people of the Delta country lived, particularly at flood times, such as this.

The tide still backed up over the marshes, and it was a narrow though extended land they had to live in. The levee, of course, was high and dry, but beside it the strip of dry land was very narrow. Only a little way back from the houses lapped the muddy flood, which made the people of this whole region almost prisoners. Though the highway of the levee was open, it was a long, long road to travel, some eighty miles to New Orleans.

The orange harvest was still going on, and the boys were delighted to help. They had picked apples and pears, but to gather oranges was a new experience.

They were allowed to eat all they wanted, too! It was the first time in their lives that they had really felt surfeited with oranges. This was better fruit than one can often find, because it had become dead ripe on the trees. Years ago oranges for market had to be picked quite green, to get them carried safely. Now, owing to the quicker transportation, they are left to ripen more, though not dead ripe like the golden sprinkling on the ground, on which they had feasted.

"I just wish," said Ned, patting himself over what must have been a very tightly packed stomach, "that I had more storage room down here!"

"Oh, never you mind," said the planter, encouragingly; "just tote them over to the store-house and stow them in there. It will be just as good as eating them, won't it?"

"Maybe it'll be better for me," Ned acknowledged, "but just the same they taste awful good."

Just then Dad appeared. "What do you say," he asked the boys, "to taking a walk to Jean's home? It's about three miles up along the levee. It would please him to have us call and inquire for his wife."

The boys were delighted to have an excuse to stretch their legs, so they started along at once.

"I tell you it feels good," said Jim, "to get some earth under one's feet again, and enough of it to keep one going. Wading around in a flooded shanty may sound like a great lark, but once is all I want."

"It almost seems as though we were back there,"

said Ned. "Just look at the water on both sides of us! There isn't enough land yet to shake a stick at."

"Well, never mind," said Dad, "there'll be enough of it to-morrow where we go, if the boat comes along."

A brisk walk of three-quarters of an hour brought them to a little white house close to the levee which they thought must be the trapper's. Sure enough, there was Jean standing at the door. He was beaming with happiness because his wife was better, and he had a new little boy to help him with his trapping some day.

"I see you coming," he said, as he shook hands with them. "I felt bad I forgot to send warden after you next day, but I so busy."

"Never mind," said Dad; "we came out all right, and had a mighty interesting time. That's a pretty solid shanty you have."

"Yes," said Jean, "she not very high, but we nail her down hard, it take big storm to carry her off. She stand lots of 'em!"

Henri came to greet them, and then they went to look at the orange grove and garden, after which they were honored with being the first visitors to see the baby.

"He not kill otter now," said the proud father, "but he got strong arms, he do it some day!"

"That's right," said Ned; "he looks like a

hustler. Some day we'll come down and have him take us out hunting."

One day on the levee pretty well satisfied the boys, and they were glad to get word that, as the weather was so much better, the steamboat would make a trip to-morrow, calling at the landing about two o'clock, in the wee small hours. Such an early routing out of bed was not particularly welcome, but there was no way to avoid it. So, having the baggage all ready, they turned in soon after supper, to make sure of some rest.

It seemed hardly long enough to have slept at all when they heard the blast of a steam whistle, and someone sang out that the boat was coming. Hustling out in the pitchy blackness, they found the steamer at the landing, and negro deck-hands were carrying aboard crates of oranges from the packing-house. The captain very kindly invited them to use the bunks in his cabin, as he and the mate had to be up anyway. They were glad to accept the kind offer. Dad took one bunk and the boys the other, sandwiching themselves in by lying in opposite directions. As it turned out, they need not have been routed out so early, for there was a big consignment of oranges to stow, and the boat did not get away until nearly six.

When it got a little lighter the boys turned out to see what was doing. Again they were bucking the tide and running in to another landing, where they

stopped only long enough to take a passenger, and again were under rapid headway.

"This is something like," said Ned with enthusiasm. "I'm glad we're going to see the big river clear up to New Orleans, and shan't have any more of that hateful old train."

There is no regular dining-room on these small river steamers. On this one the engineer served as cook, and invited the people on board a few at a time, down into the engine-room. The boat ran a sort of zig-zag course, back and forth across the river, to stop at landings on either side, wherever the little white flag was flying. After awhile they approached a small settlement on the east bank, inhabited by Austrian oystermen. Here there were no trees at all. The houses were built up on the levee, and there were also others in sight, far out on the marsh, set up on quite high piles. A long straight canal from the sea came up close to the levee, in which were anchored a number of oyster-boats. Here they were to stay some time to take on quite a load of oysters for the market.

The boys and Dad went ashore and watched the husky negro porters, in lines, walking up the gangway, each one carrying a sack of oysters over his shoulder. Dumping the sacks into the hold, they would go back to the oyster-shed on the canal for more.

The captain of the boat joined them as they looked

on, and volunteered a lot of interesting facts. He told them that these people had come from Austria a few years ago and gone into oyster-raising. Not everyone would care to live on that open marsh in so hot a climate, where it is summer a good part of the year, and fight the clouds of mosquitoes, gnats, and flies, away from schools and other advantages. It is a great oyster-country, though, and they had done very well. One man, whose house he pointed out, began there a few years ago with almost nothing, and now he owned his house and five oyster-boats, and was said to be worth ten thousand dollars.

Along the water-front of the levee some cows had gone down to get a drink, and one of the settlers, a man of about forty, came out with a lasso. He proposed to catch a hog to butcher. The settlers brand their hogs and let them range about in a common herd, getting their own living from what they can pick up. Naturally they were about half wild, and the easiest ways to get them were either to shoot or lasso them.

"I wonder," said Ned, "what sort of a cowboy, or hog-boy, he'll make!"

A husky-looking hog, bearing his brand, was busy eating a cast-up fish, and did not notice what was going on till the man had crept up and thrown the noose around its neck. With frantic squeal and a grand rush the hog was off on a tear. The man was

strong, but so was the hog, and it put up a lively fight for liberty. As they struggled up the levee, the creature made a dart around the Austrian. Before he realized what had happened, the rope became tangled about his legs, and he was thrown heavily. There he lay, yelling and groaning, while the hog, pulling away from him, went racing off.

Everyone in the settlement rushed to the rescue, and, amid excited jabbering in their native language, the man, evidently badly hurt, was carried into his house, howling with pain. Seeing that there was no doctor, nearly everybody had a say as to what was the matter with him. It was finally decided that his leg was broken, and that he had better be taken on the steamboat to a hospital in New Orleans. They made a stretcher and put him on it, only to find that it was too big to go through the front door. Finally they got him out from the rear, and carried him aboard the boat, setting the stretcher on the cabin floor. This made a delay of an hour.

After a few more stops at landings, our party began to realize that this sort of travel was slower than by train. From the time they had gone aboard it was twelve hours, in which time they had actually made *sixteen* miles up-stream. Evidently they were in for another night of it, and this time the officers would need their bunks.

"I tell you what, boys," said Dad, "if we get to

Buras before that old train leaves, I rather think we'd better take it. Do you think you could stand it?"

That was rather a bitter dose, to be sure, but it seemed the only thing to do. So, when they reached Buras, at half-past three, finding that the train was not in yet, they got off, and the boat went on its way carrying their trunk to the city, so they would not have to bother again with it at Algiers.

On the store steps the first person they saw was the youth whom Dad had given the money to buy lunch.

"Boy," said Dad, looking him square in the eye, "where's that money I gave you the other day?"

"In all their lives Ned and Jim had never seen a more shame-faced specimen of humanity. He hung his head and gazed silently at the ground. Then a sudden fright seemed to come over his sluggish nature. With a bound, like a wild deer that suddenly discovers the hunter hidden close by, he was off, running for all he was worth, and in a moment had disappeared among the bushes in the rear.

"That must be a fine manly feeling to have," remarked Ned sneeringly. "But maybe he's so stupid he can't appreciate how low-down he is."

"He certainly isn't to be envied," replied Dad. "I'm glad you've had this chance to see how contemptible it is to steal, and how a dishonest person feels. When you grow up I hope you'll always feel

that big steals by 'grafting' are just as contemptible as petty thieving like this."

In a quarter of an hour the old laggard train pulled in, three hours late, and soon started back. This time it was not so cold, but it was slow as cold molasses. In one place, at the head of an oyster canal, the train actually stayed *three* hours by the watch, loading on oysters. At this rate they might yet have to sit up all night.

For their comfort a passenger told them of a law by which the railroad company would be fined a considerable sum if that train was not in before midnight.

The time came at last, when about halfway along the route, that the train hands seemed to wake up to the fact that if they got back inside the legal limit, they would have the hustle of their lives. Besides, it was the night before Christmas, and of course they wanted to get home. At any rate the engineer put on full steam, and seldom made a stop. They bumped and thundered over the rudely-laid rails at the crazy speed of possibly twenty miles an hour. It was nip and tuck, but the train pulled into Algiers at quarter to twelve, and the Company was saved.

The little station was locked up tight, and there was not a soul around.

"Just suppose," said Dad, "that our trunk was here now. Probably they'd pitch it out on the bank here, and we'd have had a harder time than we had

before to find a dray. Like enough we'd have had to sit on it all night to keep it from being stolen."

"Good-by, old railroad!" cried Jim. "Next time we come, I hope they'll have you fixed up."

In a New Orleans hotel they all had a good snooze for the rest of the night, and woke up quite late, the boys dreaming that it was the Fourth of July.

"I say," cried Jim, rubbing his eyes as he sat up in bed. "What in thunder is all this racket? It isn't the glorious Fourth down here, is it?"

"I don't know," said Ned, "but I'll find out."

"Say, Dad," he called, as he opened the door of the adjoining room, "what in the world are they up to in this town?"

"Why," said Dad, "you haven't forgotten Christmas, have you?"

"But what's the noise got to do with Christmas!" exclaimed Ned.

"Just as much as it has to do with the Fourth," answered Dad. "Well, perhaps I didn't tell you, but they celebrate Christmas down here partly the way we do the Fourth. If they have Santa Claus and presents, they have crackers and fire-works, too, and some other things. Why you're missing it, boys! You'd better dress and get busy."

This they proceeded to do, and after breakfast they were out on the street shooting off as many crackers as any of the New Orleans kids. Out on Canal Street they joined the big promenade, threw

confetti, and blew tin horns with the rest of them.

"Won't the fellows be jealous," said Ned, "when they find out that we worked in an extra Fourth of July?"

"You're just right they will!" replied Jim.

So the day passed very pleasantly, and another day, too, before they had seen all they wanted to, and were ready to move on. It was an early move that they had to make, that misty morning, to catch the 6:50 train. This time it was a civilized railroad, the Southern Pacific, that they journeyed on. Some distance out from New Orleans the train was ferried across the Mississippi on great flat-boats. Then their route lay through a country of rice and sugar plantations, cypress swamps, and reedy lakes, on which last there were surprisingly few water-fowl. The ducks are hunted so much that they mostly keep back in the wilder parts.

After some time they were told by a gentleman, with whom they struck up an acquaintance, that they were passing through the Acadian country, the land of Evangeline's exile. It was level, like all the rest down here, with the same rice and cane fields and stretches of cypress swamp, and an occasional village, whose houses, though simple, looked neat and attractive, nestling under the groups of trees.

"It isn't as pretty country as the Acadians had at Grand Pré, Nova Scotia," remarked Jim.

"No, it isn't, for a fact," said Ned, "but I think,

though, I'd rather live down here than up in that cold country. There must be more birds and game down here, and it's fine in the winter. I just wish we could stop off here, the way we did at Grand Pré, and this time we'd see the Acadians themselves."

"I'm afraid," said the boys' new friend, "that you'd be disappointed. The Acadians aren't as romantic now as Longfellow described them. They aren't very different from the Creoles, or from ordinary people, simple farmers, easy-going, not over ambitious."

"No," answered Ned, "I suppose it's the best plan to push along on our hunt. But I'm glad we've seen both Acadian countries now. It'll make the story of Evangeline seem more real."

Presently the train pulled up at a station where they stopped a few minutes for refreshments. There was a lunch counter, and someone was ringing a dinner bell for all he was worth. This sound was enough to make anyone hungry, and all hands hustled out to get something. Ned was there among the first and got sandwiches, pie and coffee in a jiffy, while Jim, who was a little slower, got tangled up in the crowd. Everyone wanted food all at once, and the ones who made the most noise got waited on first.

"Come, there," exclaimed Ned, "don't be too polite or you'll never get a scrap!"

Jim piped up, and just as he got served and began to eat, the conductor shouted, "All aboard!"

Gulping down the coffee, the boys seized what belonged to them and tumbled aboard when the train was moving off. Dad was in the same fix, too, and was relieved to find that none of them was left behind.

After awhile they changed cars, took another train on a branch road, and in the early afternoon found themselves at Abbeville, La. There another kind game warden met them, and introduced them to a State Inspector, who was also to be a member of their party. Together they all proceeded to a little French hotel, where they had what seemed to them the most enjoyable dinner they had ever tasted. It was, of course, a long time since breakfast, and the little snatch of lunch was hardly a drop in the bucket. When the boys got busy, each with a half mallard roasted and seasoned most deliciously, oysters fried in crumbs, fresh from the bayou, and a whole raft of other delicacies,—well, the boys voted that the expressive word “bully” didn’t come within a thousand miles of the reality.

After dinner Ned unpacked his reflex camera, and the party started off with the warden to look around. First he took them down to the bayou, a nice stream on the bank of which the town is located. There at a little wharf lay the power-boat, *Pintail*, on which, next morning they were to start on a long cruise down to the coast, to the haunts of various sorts of wild game. The boat, though not quite so fine as

the *Mallard*, was a dandy, sharp at both ends, as her name implied, and able, the warden said, to get through the water like a greased pig.

"Tell us now, Warden," said Dad, as they stood on the *Pintail's* deck, looking her over, "more about the geese and ducks down where you propose taking us. Are there lots of them?"

"There's an awful sight of ducks down there," answered the warden, "and there's one place they call 'Tiger Oaks' which is the greatest place for geese in Louisiana. For a fact there are so many geese that the settlers there are hiring boys to shoot at them to drive them off and keep them from pulling up the grass in their cattle pastures."

"That sounds pretty fishy," said Dad. "How do you know? Have you been there yourself?"

"No," said the warden, "but there's a boat from there up here now with two men aboard, and that's what they say. It's beyond my territory, away down on the Gulf coast, but we'll talk with those men, and, if you believe them, we'll run down there."

While Dad and the warden were getting their stuff and the supplies aboard, the boys went for a walk beyond the bayou, which they crossed by a bridge. Carolina wrens, a species new to the boys, were singing at a great rate, and the cardinals were whistling merrily. It was lovely weather, with a temperature of about 60 degrees, just fine for exercise.

Following the course of the bayou upstream, they found nice country, and chased after various birds with the camera. Ned got a good picture of a flock of blackbirds in a tree, but a butcher-bird, cardinals and mockingbirds all gave him the slip. Presently they came to a house, where, in the yard, they saw an interesting sight. A number of beautiful deer were feeding on the grass, and one was drinking from a small pond quite near the fence. Before it had finished drinking, Ned hurried up and snapped it in the very act.

The owner of the place, seeing the boys' interest, came out and told them about the deer. He said that down below, where it was very wild, was a great country for deer. They are hunted a good deal, and occasionally hunters capture fawns alive. He himself was so fond of deer that he had secured fawns, brought them up, and now was breeding them. He said they were easily raised, and he hoped, in time, to have a regular deer farm.

After supper they all went with the warden to interview the hunters who were up from that wonderful goose resort. They found them on board their boat, and also the gentleman with whom they had talked on the train, who, it turned out, was a buyer of furs for a New Orleans firm. The craft was a good-sized power-boat, and the owners were trappers and market-hunters. They had come up from the place called Tiger Oaks, away down on

the Gulf, where there was a settlement of a few families whose business was cattle-raising, hunting and trapping.

One of the men, the older of the two, invited the party aboard, as they both knew the warden. They were just in time to see a sight which made the eyes of the boys bulge with amazement. Spread out everywhere, and stowed away in great piles, were more furs than the boys had seen at one time in all their lives. The majority were of muskrat and mink, but there were also coon and fox in good number, and an occasional otter. It turned out that there are eleven trappers in the settlement, and once a month, or sometimes six weeks, they delegate some of their number to carry the pelts taken in that time to market. This was the trading-center, and now they were just closing the deal. They did not seem to care to keep it secret. The dealer made them an offer of \$4,200 — for the batch, and they accepted it.

The boys thought that this was "going some," and were quite impressed.

When the business deal was finished, the warden introduced the party, and then Dad made inquiry about the geese.

"I do sure hope you'll come down," said the older hunter, "and shoot all the geese you can. There's no end of them, and they're the biggest nuisance we have!" Then he went on and rehearsed just what had been told before.

"Well, well!" exclaimed Ned. "It isn't strange that the English sparrow is a nuisance, but when it comes to wild geese being thick enough to destroy property, that's the limit!"

When the men heard about the plans of the party, and that they had come so far especially to study and photograph geese, they gave them the most cordial invitation to come down there, offering to do all in their power to make things pleasant for them.

"I reckon you ain't the only ones after geese," remarked the other hunter. "There's some men gone down just ahead of you."

Dad and the boys exchanged significant glances. Were the scientists going to beat them after all?

"Do you know who they are?" asked Dad.

"No," replied the hunter, "they're entire strangers to me, and they don't belong anywhere in these parts. I heard tell, though, that they came from somewhere in the North."

Thanking the men for their kindness, and promising to look them up later, they started back for the hotel.

"Well," said Dad, as they walked along, "it looks as though our rivals have the start of us here. However, they may stop to hunt along the way, and we may beat them yet. We'll make an early start in the morning, and see what we can do."

CHAPTER XIV.

A DANGEROUS ADVENTURE

FAIRLY stuffed with delicious broiled jack snipe, oysters, fritters, and numerous southern delicacies, it was a party very well content with the world that started in the *Pintail* that lovely morning down the bayou. It was the beginning of spring in southern Louisiana, though the New Year had not yet come in. The cypress, after the brief autumn rest was already pushing out its new needle-work of delicate green, and young leaves were opening in some of the shrubbery. The live-oak wore its perpetual green, as did the palmettos. This southern flora, with the decorations of streaming gray moss, arched over the bayou, which was a deep, rather sluggish stream somewhat over a hundred feet wide. Buzzards sat lazily in the trees, or floated over them, and the songs of birds rang out jubilantly.

This last was the way the boys felt, and not the sleepy way of the buzzards, though they had had even a better breakfast than these scavengers. They were just crazy for excitement and adventure, and it was necessary to employ their ardent powers. The engineer, a nice young fellow called Wallace,

took pity on them, and asked them if they would like to try steering. They stood up in the front of the cabin by the wheel, and, after a little instruction, were able to guide the boat among the floating islands of water-lilies, or "bonnets," which in some places had gathered so as almost to choke up the bayou. This plant is one of the greatest nuisances in the South. It is said to have been accidentally introduced many years ago, and now it has spread everywhere through southern waters, costing the government immense sums to keep its waterways from being completely filled with them. It grows as it floats, and its bulbs and shoots drift down the river, and are found floating even away out in the Gulf of Mexico. It took some skill, too, to round the sharp bends of the bayou, but the boys, taking turns at the wheel, did it without coming to grief. In this placid water, even with the bonnets, it was easier to steer than off the coast in the rolling swell and broken chop.

Rapidly they sped down the bayou making easily ten miles an hour, past plantations, ranches, a large cotton mill, and great areas of cypress swamp. The country grew wilder and wilder as they proceeded. Now and then a party of ducks or mud-hens would start ahead of them, or, as they turned a corner of the bayou, a great blue or Louisiana heron spring from the shore. Sometimes a watching hawk would start off from his observatory on some dead limb.

When he was not steering, Ned sat up on the forward end of the cabin, taking pictures of the scenery, or watching for chance shots at game. The State Inspector sat up there with his gun, hoping to get a few ducks for dinner.

It was lucky that they were there ready for business when they rounded a certain point. It was a big surprise to all concerned, but they almost ran plump into a beauty of a male canvas-back duck that was so busy diving and feeding that he had not heard the approach of the power-boat. Ordinarily the duck would have escaped by diving, but this time he was so rattled by this sudden adventure that he lost his wits. When ducks fly, they prefer to rise toward the wind. This time, though, the boat was coming straight down wind, and in that direction he would have to fly right aboard. So he tried to rise downwind, and made heavy lumbering work of it. By this time Ned had aimed his camera, got the duck sharp on the ground-glass, and snapped just as it was getting fairly on the way, with extended wings, a fine picture. This was no sooner done than the Inspector, who kindly waited for Ned to get his shot, fired, and missed. A scream of derision arose from all on board at the idea of missing such an easy shot. Fortunately for the dinner, the second barrel brought it down. Jim steered the boat closely past it and the warden reached out and got it aboard. It was a beautiful bird, with its silvery penciled back.

Ned was pleased enough at the prospect of dining on canvas-back, but even more so at having improved his sudden chance and taken so rare a picture. The canvas-back is a wary fellow, and one might never have such a chance again.

A little way beyond this they approached a power-boat tied to the steep bank of the stream.

"Hullo!" exclaimed the warden. "Well, if here isn't the hunting party you were inquiring about yesterday. That's the boat they went in, all right." He rang the bell to slow down, and as they drifted by, all were alert to discover the occupants. Through an opening in the bushes, Ned's sharp eyes discovered two men lying on the ground, apparently gazing up in the air, though no one could make out very clearly what they were looking at.

"Like as not," said Dad, "they're watching some birds. Well, we're ahead of them now, and we may get in our work first."

They continued down the bayou at a fair rate of speed, and were surprised enough about an hour later, to see the same boat coming after them like mad. Every last ounce of power seemed to be crowded on, for she was carrying an impressive "bone in her teeth," stirring up the calm water of the bayou tremendously.

"I'm not going to race like that," said the engineer, "it isn't safe. If they want to take such chances of blowing her up, why let them, it's their

own lookout. But I don't see what they can be in such a hurry about."

As the boat approached and passed them with a mighty rush, the mystery was solved. The men, with flushed faces, leaned out of the cabin windows brandishing whiskey bottles, cheering frantically at the party they were passing.

"Well, I never!" exclaimed the warden, "a drunken crowd sure enough. They were boozing there on the bank, and now they're crazy. It's not much hunting they'll do, unless they take a notion to shoot at us. I hope that they'll keep out of our way, or there'll be trouble brewing."

"Yes," said the engineer, as he slowed down, "for goodness' sake, let them get away before that gasoline explodes."

"There's one thing, though, we can feel relieved about," said Dad, "these fellows are no scientists, nothing but drunken tourist hunters. If they only keep their distance, that's all I ask."

The engineer had no faith that they would get very far, the way things were going. Sure enough. A few miles down the bayou they again overtook the craft, this time rammed into a big island of bonnets, her propeller, no doubt, completely tangled up.

As they approached, the men began hollering wildly to them a mixed-up jargon about their ma-

chinery being all gone to pieces and what in the world were they going to do.

The boys were inclined to make mocking replies, but Dad stopped them, saying that it was dangerous to have any fuss with drunken men. The warden told the men that they could not stop, as they had important business, but that plenty of boats came through here and they could hire a tow.

"Toot, toot!" suddenly blew their own whistle. Looking ahead, they saw that they were approaching a little settlement, and that across the bayou was stretched a heavy rope or cable.

"Oh, yes," said the warden, in response to their inquiries, "this is one of the ferries we have down here. They use a flat-boat which runs along the cable, and is hauled back and forth by ropes. There's a watch-house up there, and in a minute you'll see what the watchman does."

Sure enough, in response to their signal, a man hurried out and slacked off the cable till it sank in the water deep enough to let them pass over it. As they went by they saw the flat-boat at the little wharf, and a well-built man with a swarthy complexion standing nearby.

"Hullo, if this ain't the warden!" he called out, hailing the boat. "Why, Warden, you're just the man I've been wanting to see. Come tie up here, like a good neighbor, and let's talk awhile."

"This man," said the warden, turning to the party, "is just the man *we* want. He hunts most all the time, so I don't often see him, but he knows the country down here like a book, and everything that runs or swims or flies. He can give us a lot of points and maybe put us on to something around here. If you say so, we'll go ashore."

"Why, surely!" said Dad, and the boys were not one bit less willing. So they ran in and tied up to the pier.

It doesn't take outdoor enthusiasts long to get acquainted, and in no time they were all talking away as though they had known each other always. The hunter seemed to take a shine to the party, and invited them all to his house for dinner, to help him eat possum, a good supply of which he had fallen heir to on his hunt the day before. Possum meat is fat and oily, a good deal like pork, and proved very appetizing, the boys thought.

At the table was a young fellow they called John, who was on a fishing trip and had put up there. From his talk he seemed to be a great fisherman, and very enthusiastic. He was going fishing that very afternoon and wanted the boys to come along and try it. Some miles in back were a series of ponds where there was said to be good fishing. He had plenty of bait that morning, and there were poles enough here at the house.

"I've no objection," said Dad, when asked per-

mission. "For myself I think I'll keep our friend company on his quail hunt this afternoon, so if you prefer, you may try the fish."

It did not take the boys long to get started. One of the hunter's dogs tagged after them, and they let him go along too. The way led them at first through fields grown up to weeds, and then out across a rice plantation, with its broad fields. Some of the country beyond this was open and rather marshy, with occasional "hammock," of mixed woodland. There they struck into the cypress, immense trees, something like our larches in foliage, growing on wet ground or in shallow water, with curious broad bases and spreading roots. In the midst of this was a shallow, marshy pond, situated in an open space, with bunches and islands of low willows growing here and there.

This was a great place for birds. Coots and gallinules bobbed about among the clumps of grass and rushes growing from the water, and a few of the purple gallinule, a gaudy bird clad in a wonderful coat of blue. Not so gay in color, but even stranger in appearance, were the curious water-turkeys, or snake-birds, great black fellows with long fan-tails and very slender elongated necks. Some of them were perched on the willows by some nests, which they probably intended to rebuild and occupy later on. Others were in the water. As soon as they caught sight of the party, even before the

boys saw them, these last had sunk their bodies, and only their long slim necks stuck out.

"Look, fellows!" cried Jim, as he first caught sight of them. "Why, the pond's full of snakes!"

Their guide laughed, pointing to the snake-birds on the trees.

"Those necks up there," he said, "are the same kind you see out in the water. They're great divers and skulkers. When they sink down that way, they're pretty safe from being shot, because their necks are so slender it would be next to impossible to hit one. But I don't know who'd want to anyway, except maybe some fool tourist."

"I tell you what, though," said Ned, "they're my game with the camera, if I can work it. Do you suppose I could sneak on to those fellows in the willow clump?"

"They're pretty shy, but you might, if you're very careful," answered John. "Go ahead, if you want to try."

Ned had carried his reflex as well as the fish-pole, knowing it was not safe to wander in such a wild country unarmed. "Who could tell what might attack you," he was often accustomed to say, and sure enough, his fears were now justified. Were not the snake-birds now attacking him,—in the way that camera-game attacks by presenting a golden opportunity! Wouldn't it be dreadful to be unarmed, un-

prepared, when such shots were offered, a thing to lie awake nights over or give bad dreams about "if I only had!"

Anyhow, Ned was not bothered now by any vain regrets. He adjusted his camera, and withdrew the slide from the plate. Then he made believe retire, but got behind another clump of willows and began to creep up. When these willows would no longer serve, there were clumps of grass and bushes. The rest of the party stood still, and the birds gave them their attention, not bothering themselves about anything else.

At last Ned was quite near. Through the crevices in the bushes he got a good focus. Then, keeping his eyes to the hood and the birds all the time on the plate, he stepped quietly to one side till the view was clear. The birds saw him move, but he was so much the color of the dead grass, with his brown suit and cap, that they did not fly, even when he made the shot. Almost without moving, except to lower the camera, he put back the slide, turned the holder, drew the slide from the new plate, and got his shot just before the alarmed birds sprang into the air.

Jim was now beckoning, and, looking in the direction which he indicated, he saw a number of herons which had flown up from the edge of the pond and perched on the willows a little further be-

yond. Herons were game, too, for Ned, and good game, a kind hard to get, for they are watchful and nervous. Again he got ready, and, pursuing the same tactics as before, added several good trophies to his series. These were the kind known as the Louisiana heron, of a pretty grayish-blue color, and of medium size.

Pushing on, now, they waded cypress swamps, wriggled through undergrowth, and floundered across marshes before they reached the first pond. It was in an open marshy country, surrounded by bog, and it was no easy matter to get out to the edge, except in certain places. Though John had managed to find the pond, he did not happen on a good place to approach it. It was hard to get to the edge, and even when they did, it was a poor place to make a cast because the water was so choked up with various growths.

"Well, I'll be hanged," sputtered John, "if these pesky bonnets haven't just taken possession! I don't know what it's coming to, but on my life there won't be any fishing anywhere if these things keep on growing."

Skirting the shore, they came, at length, to a little stream flowing from the pond, the outlet into another. Following it, they found that the other pond, a smaller one, was also badly choked up and unfavorable for catching fish.

"Look!" cried Jim. "See that fish break water,

and there's another. Say, but it must be dandy fishing here. If we can only find some good open spots!"

"You bet!" said John. "Those are probably jacks, what you fellows most likely call pike or pickerel, and there are bass in there too, and catfish. Well, come on, boys, we've got to get a mess somehow. I'm just crazy to taste fish."

"We are, too," said Ned, "you can depend upon that. But let's try it here. Maybe we can get some strikes."

Just then a flock of ducks started up from the pond just beyond the next bend of the shore. The dog, which had been ranging ahead had started them. Ned whistled to him, and like an obedient fellow, trained as he was, he came in to heel.

"Nice fellow!" said Ned, patting him. "A well trained dog like him is worth having. I'll warrant he's a fine retriever. If we shot some of those ducks he'd fetch them out for us in great style."

"Yes," said the drummer, "that's what they use him for. But he isn't the kind for quail, so they didn't want him this afternoon."

"Now then, here goes for a cast," said Ned, and he threw out the line, aiming for a little open pool. He threw a little too far, though, and the hook caught in the stem of a big water-lily. It seemed to be stuck for good, and it was only after quite a struggle that he got it back to try again.

After some effort Jim got his line in a good spot, and quick as thought a big jack seized it and darted off through the bonnets as it felt the pull. It made a great fight, and in a jiffy had the line tangled among the roots so badly that there seemed to be no way of getting free without someone's wading in. Before anyone volunteered, however, the fish broke the hook off, and Jim pulled in his useless line.

"There's no use doing this any more," exclaimed John. "I've got a better plan."

"What's that?" asked Ned eagerly.

"Why, it's dead easy, just dynamite the pond," said John, in a matter-of-fact way.

The boys looked at him in amazement.

"Yes," he explained, "I'm on to that trick. I didn't let on, of course. But I knew there were lots of fish in this part of the country, and that they were hard to catch. So when I left town I bought a dynamite cartridge all fixed to set off. I didn't expect the warden down, but he never'll know, if you don't tell him. It's too far away for him to hear it, and even if he did find out, he couldn't catch me anyhow."

"Have you got the dynamite with you?" asked Jim.

"Sure I have," said John, as he pulled it out of his pocket and held it up. "That'll fix your old jack that broke your hook!"

"I don't like the idea," said Ned, soberly, having

recovered his presence of mind after this big surprise. "It's against the law, and it's a mean thing to do to spoil other people's fishing just to get a mess ourselves. I don't want you to do it."

"You take notice," replied John, "I don't ask *you* to do it. This is my job, and you needn't have any responsibility."

"Just the same I have some responsibility," said Ned, bristling up. "If I stand and see a crime committed, I'm liable to be taken for a criminal, too."

"Do you mean to call me a criminal?" blustered John.

"I do, if you set off that dynamite," retorted Ned.

"Well, I'm going to do it, just you mind that," said John.

"If you do," said Ned, "*you* bear in mind that you'll have to take all that's coming to you."

"Do you mean to say that you'll *squeal* on me?" angrily shouted John.

"You can call it what you want to," replied Ned, "but I say there's a big difference between tattling and squealing. Of course I wouldn't give you away about a little harmless joke, but when it come to a crime, no respectable American citizen with any sort of manhood is going to stand for it."

"That idea of yours about 'squealing,'" put in Jim, addressing John, "is nothing but a kid notion of little school-boys. *Men* don't think that way, not decent men."

"You kids make me tired," said John defiantly. "But I'm not going to be cheated out of my fish, and you salt it down for a fact that if you squeal on me you'll be mighty sorry for it before long." And with that he pulled a match from his pocket.

John was much older and stronger than they, and the boys felt dazed. Before they could either of them decide how to act, John had placed the dynamite on a piece of driftwood, lighted the fuse, and, with his fish-pole, pushed it out into the pond.

Unexpected things were following thick and fast, and here was the next. The instant that John had pushed out the dynamite, the dog, who had been taught to retrieve things thrown into the water, with a sudden bound, dashed into the pond and swam straight for the dynamite.

"Hi there! Come back! To heel!"

A chorus of such shouts burst involuntarily from each one of the party. The dog, bent solely on his errand, paid no attention, but paddled away. Louder they yelled, till it seemed as though they would split their throats, but the dog kept on. Then they tried to find things to throw, but there was nothing but grass and mud.

The boys and John were so excited that they hardly knew what to do, not knowing how far the effect of an explosion over the water would reach. If they had had a gun they might have shot at the dynamite, either to sink or discharge it before

the dog got there. But they had none, and now the dog had reached it, seized the cartridge, and started back with it in his mouth, paying no attention to their cries to drop it. Apparently the fuse was one set to burn quite a while, and they were now in real peril.

"Run for your lives!" shouted Ned, "and scatter out so we won't get all blown up!"

If ever they ran, it was then. It was a real race for life, and a lottery, too. Whichever one the dog followed up was liable to be blown into eternity, unless the cartridge should either fail to explode, or go off before the dog caught up. Through such a morass they could hardly break the world's record for the two hundred yard dash, but it did seem that they might break the record for exertion, or else their necks.

The tall grass and bushes hid the runners from view of the dog as he came out of the water, but he could hear them floundering through the swamp, and raced off in the direction of some of the sound. As luck would have it, it was toward Ned. The grass was shorter out here, and Ned could see him come, as could the others.

If John had been a manly fellow, he would have tried to call off the dog to him, since he had caused the trouble and had said he would take the responsibility. But the class of people who throw dynamite are not the stuff that heroes are made of. Instead

of trying to call the dog from Ned and risk his own life, he hid behind the bushes and let the dog chase Ned, with the cartridge in his mouth.

Poor Ned's shouts at the dog to "go home!" had not the slightest effect. The dog was gaining on him fast, and in another minute would be up with him. Surely by that time the cartridge would explode. Across his mind flashed all sorts of things, among others how kind his father had been to take him on this trip, and what a blow this would be to him and mother.

Then came an awful roar and shock. An avalanche seemed to rage around him, and he was hurled flat in the mud, where he lay motionless and silent. The others rushed towards him, Jim crying bitterly. Ned lay face down in the muck, soaked and plastered almost beyond recognition. The instant they reached him they lifted him so he would not drown, if any life were left. Ned opened his eyes, looking confused, as though he were struggling to remember where he was.

"I didn't get killed, did I?" he murmured.

"Oh, Ned, I'm so glad you aren't!" sobbed Jim.
"But are you hurt badly? How do you feel?"

Ned raised himself, now, and rubbed his head. Then he began to stretch his arms and legs, and, finding there was no pain, stood up.

"I guess I was only stunned," he said. "I don't feel any pain, and nothing seems to be broken. But

I must have been hit pretty hard, for I never knew what happened. It was a close call!"

"It certainly was," said John, "and I'm mighty sorry I got you into such a scrape. Well, it's done now, and of course, that fine retriever is done for, so I've got to face the music I suppose. But let's see what there is left of the dog."

They did not have far to go. Just a few yards behind Ned was where the explosion occurred. There was a great hole in the marsh, which was rapidly filling with water, and for quite a distance in every direction the bushes were plastered with mud.

"That's what hit me," said Ned, "but even the concussion alone must have been almost enough to kill anyone."

"You just ought to have a looking-glass to see yourself," said Jim. "You look as though the whole marsh had struck you."

"Well, I guess a good deal of it did," said Ned, "but more of it must have hit poor doggy. He was too well trained for his own good. I wonder where he went to?"

"Maybe," said Jim, looking up aloft, "he's up there, and hasn't had time to get back yet. But let's look around. I don't see a sign of him."

There was no trace of him in the hole, nor near it, so Jim and John circled around further back, while Ned stood collecting his scattered wits, rub-

bing himself, and trying to get some of the mud off his clothes. Pretty soon the others came back, but without even a lock of the poor dog's hair to remember him by.

"Well, poor fellow," said Ned, "he's evidently just completely wiped out. The thing went off in his mouth, as he held it up over him, and it probably drove him a considerable piece down in this soft stuff toward China. Say, but that's about as quick a death and funeral as you often read about. The executioner that killed him buried him in about a thousandth of a second, the time it takes my reflex camera to expose a plate."

No sooner had Ned mentioned the word camera than a horrified expression flashed over his face. "Oh, my reflex!" he ejaculated. "What's become of it?"

As he said this, he rushed back to where he had fallen. No camera was there. Then he hurried further along, to see if the concussion of the air had pitched it ahead. There was not a sign of it.

"It's gone!" exclaimed Ned, looking angrily at his new companion. "Confound you, I wish I'd never seen you, with your lawless tricks, almost killing me and destroying the most valuable property I've got! I don't care if I never see you or hear of you again." Ned was so angry now that he felt like going on to curse him. If ever it were justifiable to use bad language, now seemed to be the

time. But he had not been brought up that way, and was not a profane boy, so he managed to restrain that part of it, but felt justified in letting go some of his righteous indignation, and he proceeded to give the fellow, big as he was, a good idea of what he thought of him.

Jim presently broke in by suggesting that they follow Ned's trail back and see if he had not dropped the camera. So he and Ned started back, John following. They saw nothing of it until they reached the bank of the pond, and there it lay on the grass in a dry spot, perfectly safe, plates and all. All unconsciously, in his excitement, he had dropped it when the dog started after the dynamite cartridge. It seemed to Ned as though, next to finding that he was alive after the explosion, he had never felt more relieved at anything in his life. He was glad he had dropped it, because, if he had held on, not only would his pictures have been broken and probably the camera ruined, but it might have delayed him in running just enough for the dog to have caught up with him, and he and the camera would have gone along with the dog.

"See here now," said John gruffly, "seeing you fellows don't like me any more, I don't know as I care about staying with you, and I'm going."

"Aren't you going back to the house?" asked Jim in surprise.

"Not on your life," said he. "That fellow

would claim a couple of hundred for his pup, and I haven't got the money. He doesn't know where I'm from, and he never will know. He's welcome to what little luggage I left, in part payment."

"I call that a mean, cowardly trick," said Ned, "to run away in that style. If you were any kind of a man you'd face the music and earn money to pay the bill. I guess you're no better than the rest of the dynamiters."

"If there weren't two of you," shouted the dynamiter hotly, "I'd wipe up the ground with you and teach you to respect your elders." And then, without a word of farewell, he turned and tramped angrily off over the marsh, striking across country.

"Well," said Ned, "that's a good riddance. I guess we can follow our trail home."

Some parts of the journey gave them a little trouble, but they managed to keep to the signs, and, helped by good memories, at length reached the settlement. Dad and the rest of the party listened in amazement to their story.

"That dog," said the hunter, "was the finest retriever I ever had. It's a big loss to me, but, if the fellow had come back and owned up like a man, I shouldn't have been unreasonable."

"You see," said the warden, "what sort of people we're liable to run up against in this wild country. Such cowardly trash is the very kind that would pull a gun on a warden if he was caught red-handed

breaking the law. He wouldn't think of anything except getting away."

And now it was Dad's innings to speak. "It wasn't anything you could help," he said to the boys. "I'm glad you both took the stand you did in trying to stop the fellow."

So they talked on, until it was time to go back to the boat. There was a nice bunch of quail donated by the hunter to go along too, to keep the canvas-back company. And when they turned in, it surely seemed that never before had bunks felt so good.

CHAPTER XV.

LOST ON THE MARSH

BRIGHT and early all hands were astir, and they were off down the bayou. Breakfast was prepared and served as they proceeded, and all took hold both in getting it and getting outside of it. Much of the course was through the wildest sort of cypress-swamp country. No timber could look more picturesque than these tall, strange sentinels festooned with gray moss, and turning green again under the genial influence of the strange Christmas springtime. After a while they passed a large cattle ranch, whose owners must have had things all their own way, since the country looked as though there could be few but wild animals to interfere with them.

Below this the region became more and more open and marshy. The cypress and other timber appeared only in strips, with areas of marsh between, and presently disappeared entirely, save on the horizon in the dim distance. The country looked much as it did at the mouth of the Mississippi, except that, as it was further back from the sea, the vegetation on the marsh grew even more rank, as in a fresh-water bog.

In great areas the canes raised their spear-like points some eight to ten feet high.

"This marsh is an awful place," remarked the warden. "It's so soft you can hardly flounder through, and, after you get into those canes there's no telling where you are. Hunters have got lost in there and had awful times getting out. One needs to be mighty careful."

"Is there any game around in it?" asked Ned.

"Well, I just reckon there is," replied the warden. "It's full of game. Every now and then you come to a pond-hole, and the ducks are feeding all through it by the thousands. Gracious! Here comes a bunch right now!"

The Inspector seized up his gun, just as a fine bunch of green-winged teal, or winter teal, as they are called by the local hunters, whizzed by them, going like so many bullets. Bang! Bang! went the gun, but not a bird stopped. It really seemed to the boys that the shot could hardly have caught up to them, traveling at such a rate.

"If there's any bird that flies faster than a teal," said Jim, "I'd like to see it!"

"I don't believe," said the warden, "but what they're the fastest proposition there is made."

"Here's something slow for a change," said Ned, pointing to a clapper rail, or marsh hen, that had just flushed from one shore of the bayou, and was flying across it. Its legs dangled down and the small round

wings fluttered feebly, just enough to keep it in the air. No sooner did it reach the other side than it dropped like a stone into the canes.

"This marsh seems to be just full of them," remarked Dad. "That clucking noise of theirs comes from all around. But if they aren't any great shakes on flying, they make it up in running. They can slip through the tangle like mice because they're all 'as thin as a rail.' That's where the expression must have come from, unless they named the bird after a fence-rail. Speaking about their running makes me think how naturally they come by it. Why, the young ones run off around the nest just as soon as they're hatched. They are tiny little mites, covered with black down, and even then they can run and hide like witches. I remember trying to catch one of them on a marsh in Virginia, where it was almost an open mud-flat, with just a few blades of salt grass. The little thing started, and I ran after it as hard as I could go. After a hard sprint, I caught up, and made a grab for it. The little rascal dodged, and I plumped my arms deep into that sticky black mud. He just disappeared, and I never saw him again."

"That was a good one on you," said Ned, as they all laughed. "I guess I know how your coat looked! But before those ducks came along the warden started to tell about the game in this marsh."

"Oh, yes," said the warden, "besides the ducks and marsh hens, there's no end of minks and musk-

rats, and some coons and otters, and plenty of deer. The deer come out from the woods and wander all over the marsh browsing. When you go in there, you'll see their trails through the canes. Hunters come down here with dogs and take their stand by these different trails, scattered out. If the dogs start a deer, like as not they'll chase it past a hunter, and he gets his shot, at close range, too. The canes are so thick that the deer won't see him, sometimes, till he's most near enough to touch it."

Mile after mile the power-boat glided down the winding bayou through the marsh. The bayou opened up wider and wider, and at length they found themselves in a wide shallow body of water known as Little Vermilion Bay.

"This's bad," said the warden, as he looked dubiously at the muddy wake they were leaving behind; "it's an awful low course of tides, and she's dragging hard. I don't know if we'll get through."

"But you're getting away off shore," said Ned; "you must be most out to the channel."

"Channel!" echoed the warden. "Well, I just wish you'd make a channel for us. They don't have such things in this country. Why, you might be out here two or three miles from shore and get stuck for a week, till there was a change in the moon. How'd you boys like that?"

"My, but wouldn't that be terrible!" exclaimed

Ned anxiously. "I do hope that won't happen to us."

"Well, I hope not," said the warden, "but I reckon we'll manage to push through somehow. Keep her going for all she's worth," he called to the engineer, "so we sha'n't lose headway. If she stops we're goners."

They kept sliding along over the mud, and, when they got past the end of an island, the water deepened a little, and they were over the worst of it. Now that they were well out in the bay, they changed the course to the westward, keeping parallel to the shore. After quite a long run they began to see what looked like a building on the shore, far away.

"That's the club-house where we're going," said the warden. "It'll be pleasanter there than staying on the boat, and we'll stop there for the night."

In fact, this was part of the original plan. The warden had secured permission to use it, and had the key.

It was well along in the morning when they finally anchored the *Pintail* offshore from it, and proceeded to disembark themselves and their stores in the tender, a matter which required three trips.

The club-house proved to be a nice roomy place, a large wooden structure perched up on high piles, built out over the water, at least a dozen feet above it. In front was a landing-place for boats, and a bridge connected it with the shore.

"I declare," said Ned, "if we'd had such elevated lodgings down the delta in that storm, it would have been a lot more comfortable. Say, but this is a regular Broadway skyscraper! It's the tallest building in this whole place,— which isn't saying a great deal, though! We wouldn't mind a storm up here, but just the same we don't want to be cooped up. I'm just crazy to try the old marsh."

"It'll give you boys all the exercise you want," said the warden, "only you must look out and keep your bearings."

In the main room of the shanty was a good cook-stove, and out back, as well as on the shore, plenty of drift-wood. The boys soon had a hot fire, and the men got out from the closets all needed utensils and dishes, and in short order had plenty of broiled quail and sweet potatoes, and various other things which incited the boys almost to break their record. It really did seem that at each meal they ate more than at any other in their lives.

"Of course you do," said Dad. "Why, you're growing like weeds; I can almost *see* you shoot up and broaden out, and you've got more room for food every day, and more appetite."

"Don't you remember," said Jim to Ned, "how everybody was saying what an unhealthy place those Louisiana marshes must be, malaria, and yellow fever, and all sorts of dreadful things."

"They just make me tired," cried Ned. "Un-

healthy? Yes, it looks that way, doesn't it! We've never been more healthy in our lives, have we? I guess we'll take our chances. The biggest danger is from eating too much. I wonder if I'll get over this? I feel too full to move, just stuffed with quail!"

"Maybe it'll help us fly," said Jim. "Wouldn't it be dandy if we could just skim over this marsh above the tops of the canes and surprise the ducks, or run on to the deer browsing out there!"

"Now then," said Dad, "let's talk over the programme for the afternoon. The warden and I propose to take the tender and look up some good place to build a duck-blind for to-morrow morning. Now, what would the rest of you like to do?"

At once the boys set up an insistent claim on the marsh, while the engineer and inspector thought they would find enough work to do on the boat and in camp. This was all agreed upon, so the boys got out their cameras and plate-holders, and started out, being cautioned by the warden not to go far, and to take bearings carefully by the sun, so as to be able to strike the shore of the bay again.

Even before the boys crossed the bridge from the club-house to the shore, they discovered game. On the muddy shore a number of kildeers were feeding, while over the marsh great flocks of blackbirds — both grackles and red-wings — were circling and alighting. The kildeers are a kind of plover which

often are found in dry pastures, as well as by the shore. While rather tame, when not molested, they are a restless, noisy bird. If they think anyone is after them, they are apt to set up a great outcry and look out for themselves pretty carefully. As long as the boys walked boldly across the bridge on to the marsh, they paid little attention. But when they turned and began to sneak up behind the grass, one of the "kildees," as some people call them, caught on to the racket, and set up a great crying,—“kildee, kildee, kildee,”—noise enough to alarm the whole neighborhood. The rest of them paid attention, and all then flew further along-shore.

After quite a chase, Ned got in a shot or two with his reflex, rather far away for much of a picture, and then they decided to try the marsh. The going on the shore was not half bad, and it was open enough to give them quite a good view of things.

“I guess the warden was jollying us,” said Jim; “I don’t expect the marsh is as hard traveling as he makes out.”

“It won’t take long to find out,” remarked Ned, as they struck in. The words were hardly out of his mouth when Jim stumbled into a hole, and before he could flounder back had filled one of his long rubber boots.

“What do you think about it now?” said Ned mockingly.

Jim was rather crestfallen, but made the best of

it, as he good-naturedly allowed Ned to help him empty his boot and wring out his clothes.


"It certainly does look as though we'd have to be careful where we step," he remarked.

This being done, they struck out again into the marsh, and found themselves in a forest of tall canes which reached away over their heads. Nothing could be seen through this tangle even five feet away, save the sky overhead. The sun was behind them, and they noticed carefully its direction, so as to be able to find their way back.

"I declare," said Jim, as they struggled on, "we'll never get any pictures unless we come into something different than this!"

"Oh, we shall pretty soon," replied Ned. "You know there are ponds in through it, the warden said, and when we get to the edge of some of these there'll be some good chances, don't you worry."

In beyond them the blackbirds were making the biggest kind of a racket. A big flock of thousands had settled down in the canes, and all of them were talking at once. They sounded like a convention of wheelbarrows that hadn't been greased for ten years. They were very restless and would start up and alight again every few minutes, making it hard to get where they were. But the boys were determined to see what all the racket was about, so they pushed on and on. After awhile they came to an opening in the canes, and, peering out, they saw the blackbirds. In



a great black swarm they had alighted on the reeds and canes across the opening, where they were clinging to the stems, weighing them down by their great numbers. They saw the boys the instant they appeared, and, with a roar of wings, the air was darkened with them as they rose. Ned had his reflex camera all ready and got in his shot just at the right time, as they were starting up.

"I tell you that will be a dandy picture," said he to Jim. "I wonder how many birds'll show in it? I guess more than in any picture we've got yet, except the geese."

"Listen!" said Ned eagerly. "There must be a pond-hole over there, and the ducks are in it feeding. If we work it right now we ought to get some pictures of them. I'll tell you how we'll do it. When we get near the edge, you have your camera ready for a general view. Your shutter's so quiet the ducks won't hear it. So you get your snap through the reeds, and I'll take them with the reflex as they rise."

Pushing on toward the sounds, they began, after awhile, to see water through the reeds. It was a rather small pond, and the water was dotted with ducks, swimming about and feeding. Some of them were tipped up, their tails in the air and heads under water, feeding on the bottom. Keeping perfectly still, after they had very carefully crept up near enough to get a good view, they watched the ducks awhile, and made out that there were mallards, pin-

tails, spoonbills, and green-winged teal. The boys had a whispered conversation.

"They'll fly about as soon as we get our cameras clear of the reeds," said Ned, "but I guess, if you get your focus now before we move, you can get in the shot before they jump, and then I'll take them in the air. Are you ready? Come on, now!"

Quietly and deftly the boys slipped out to the edge of the thicket. The ducks saw them the instant they appeared, but Jim snapped just before they jumped. Then there was a great splashing and shistling of wings. Just as they cleared the water Ned got in his work. A thousandth of a second exposure "froze" them on the plate as finely as anyone could wish, and the boys capered for joy.

"That's the stuff, old boy!" cried Jim, slapping Ned on the back. "I tell you what, we're getting some corking things on this trip, don't you forget it! When we tell the other fellows about what wonderful game we found they can't say we're nature-fakers because we can show them the goods. But won't those ducks look fine! My picture'll show them in the water, and in yours they'll be hung up in the air. Won't it seem strange, after we've seen them out here going like the mischief, to see them, when we develop the plates, flying and yet staying right there!"

"That's so," replied Ned, "and it makes me think that we've got a mighty good battery of cameras.

Each one does things that the other can't, and between us we can do about everything in our line that there is to be done. Well, the ducks have gone. What shall we do next, push on further?"

"Why sure," said Jim, "we've only just begun!"

This they proceeded to do. Doubling around the pond, they kept along in the same direction. Hard traveling indeed it was pushing through the rank vegetation of the swamp and floundering through its treacherous bog. They had gone quite a distance when suddenly both of them stopped short in a fever of excitement, as a sudden crashing sound startled them tremendously. Some large animal, standing in the canes, had heard their approach, and, taking fright, was bounding off through the thicket.

"It's probably a deer," whispered Ned, "but it might be a bear. We can't creep up quietly enough in these canes to get near an animal, but one might happen to come to us, if the wind was right. But let's push on now and see what we can make out of the trail."

It didn't take the boys long to get to where the creature had started. Right here there was a little opening, where there was long grass. It was trampled down all about, as though the animal had been moving around and feeding. The boys looked sharp, and saw where the grass had been eaten off, indicating that it was a deer and not a bear. Fol-

lowing on, they saw the trail it had made as it bounded off, too slight for a lumbering bear.

"I expect from what we've heard the men say," remarked Ned, "that the bears are mostly further back inland. You remember how President Roosevelt went bear-hunting in the Louisiana cane-brakes. I don't know just what part of the State that was. But they say he didn't think much of the bears down here. They weren't much bigger than teddy-bears, anyhow! Just the same, though, I'd like to see one. Wouldn't it sound fine to say we'd seen a real wild bear!"

"Maybe the deer won't run far," said Jim. "Let's follow the trail and see what we can find. It'll make a little easier walking, too."

Ned agreed to that all right, and so pushed on and on. After awhile they heard a faint sound in the distance. They listened, and thought it sounded nearer. It was clear now what it was, the baying of a hound. Louder and louder it grew and that rapidly.

"It's chasing something," exclaimed Ned. "Perhaps they'll come near enough to let us see the fun."

As they listened, they located the sound ahead and off to the left. Apparently the chase would pass some distance beyond them, and to the left, so the boys hurried as fast as they could in that direction, leaving the trail they had been following. It was well that they hurried, for presently they heard the

crashing in the canes and grass, far ahead of the dog, of the creature pursued, which evidently had a good start. It was yet beyond them, so they rushed on, floundering through the mud, getting splashed up in good shape, but eager to reach a more open place where they might possibly see something, even if they should get no picture.

Just as they came to a place where they could see off a little, they saw the tops of the canes beyond waver, and then, with a bound, the deer almost flew across the opening a little ahead of them, a fine buck with good antlers. Unfortunately there was no chance for a picture. They themselves were pretty well buried in the long grass, and so was the deer, though they could for an instant see most of his body. Besides this a bank of clouds had risen and covered the sun, and there was not enough light for such a rapid shot. But how fine and graceful the buck did look, with that soft brown, so nimble, so interesting. It was gone like a flash, but the boys had seen a wild deer in Louisiana, and were pleased and excited. Even though they had not photographed it with the camera, they had done so on the retina of the eye. As long as they lived they would be able to call up at any time to their minds the picture of that graceful form bounding through the grass. Besides, they had another species to the list of their field experience.

Now came the dog, hot on the trail of the deer,

and the boys had a nearer glimpse of it as it crossed the opening, for they had advanced almost to the trail. It was a splendid great hound. Though it saw them so suddenly as to make it start with surprise, it was too eager in pursuit to stop. No other dog was with it or within hearing, not any hunter, as far as they could tell. Apparently the dog, out on its own hook, had started the deer, and was on one of those long chases which sometimes wear out and lose a valuable dog, to say nothing of killing the poor deer from fatigue and fright.

"I think it's high time now," remarked Ned, "that we turned back. But I vote that we swing more to the north, and strike the shore nearer the head of the bay. That'll give us a chance to find some new ponds and see more game, and it'll be easy to follow the shore back to the club-house."

Jim agreed to this, and so, taking what they were sure was the right direction, they started on. The sun was entirely hidden, but from long practice they had a good sense of direction, and felt confident that they could keep on the straight course. Now and then they came to a pool and scared out a few more ducks.

The hard walking began to tell at last on the boys, and they looked ahead eagerly, whenever there was an opening, hoping to see the bay ahead of them. Time passed, and the daylight was noticeably fading.

Neither had expressed to the other the fear which had been coming to them more and more.

"You don't suppose," said Jim, "that we could have got off our course? It seems as though we've surely gone just the way we set out to."

"I know it seems so," replied Ned, "but they say a person can very easily get turned in such places. One time I know I got lost in a fog. I was rowing, and by and by I came to land. It wasn't the island I expected, and I couldn't locate it till the fog lifted, and I saw I'd come back almost to the place I started from. My right arm's stronger than the left, and I rowed around in a circle. I had a pocket compass, too, and when I took it out I thought for sure the compass had gone wrong."

"Say!" exclaimed Jim, "haven't you got the little compass in your pocket?"

"No," said Ned, "that's just the trouble. I put it in my other coat. Isn't that provoking! The only time so far when we've really needed it we haven't got it. Let's push along, and maybe we'll come out all right yet."

The boys certainly made a hard try for liberty and grub. For two hours more they pushed on as fast as they could go, which was far from lightning speed, considering that they were struggling through the tangle, wading through mud and water, and stumbling into holes. Ponds and creeks kept heading

them off. It was useless to try to follow the channels out to the bay. The branches which flowed in kept them from continuing, without having to swim across one every few minutes. It wasn't summer, either, and the northerly wind had a decided chill after the sun went down.

The sun had indeed set. In the South there is very little twilight, particularly on a cloudy night like this. Indeed, after the dusk began to fall, in what seemed to the boys almost no time, it had become so dark that they could not see to go another step, so they stopped just where they were, which was as well as anywhere, because one place was just like another.

It was certainly a wretched plight to be in. Of course, they were hungry and tired, but there was no food. In no spot was the water less than half way to their knees, so they could not even sit down. The act of walking had kept them warm, but they were more or less wet, and soon the wind and dampness would chill them through.

"I don't see," said Jim, "why they don't fire off a gun so we can tell what direction they're in."

"I'll warrant they've tried that long ago," replied Ned, "but I'm afraid we're all turned around and have got 'way off, too far to hear anything. I guess it's up to us to let them know where we are."

"What do you mean," said Jim, "start a fire?"

"That's it exactly," answered Ned. "These dry canes and grass ought to burn like paper. I suppose

it'll set the whole country afire, and I hate to do it, but I don't see any other way to attract attention. We might never get out alive if we don't. It's dozens of miles to any settler's place, and I think it'll rain and put the fire out before it does any harm."

"Good work," exclaimed Jim, with a note of returning courage in his voice. "That'll do the business. It's just dark enough now so it'll show up in great shape. Go ahead and touch her off. It's lucky for us you've got some matches, because I used the last one in my pocket to start the old stove up."

"I've got about a dozen," said Ned, "and that ought to do the little trick."

They were near the edge of a mass of tangled canes. Striking a match on a dry place inside his coat, Ned touched off a mass of dry stuff which Jim had bunched together for him. After a moment it blazed up finely, and began spreading to the other stuff around. Very quickly there was a lively blaze, and in a few minutes the marsh was well afire. At first it burned in strips, being headed off by creeks, but after awhile there was such a body of flame and sparks that no creek could stop it, and it went roaring over the marsh. Such a brilliant, wonderful spectacle did it make that the boys for the time almost forgot their troubles, enjoying the sight and warmth. They could almost imagine they were back in New Orleans celebrating Christmas.

"The minks and muskrats had better hustle out

their fire department," said Ned jokingly. "I guess, though, there'll be some deep diving done to get out of the way."

A grass fire burns fast and is quickly over in any one spot. This the boys discovered, as the flames raged beyond them, leaving a smoking, smoldering waste behind.

"That doesn't warm us any now," said Jim, "and we can't follow it in that smoke. Let's build one of our own. If we keep it up it'll help show where we are."

That was certainly a fine idea, so the boys went to work cutting canes. When they had gathered quite a pile, they lighted it, and had a nice bonfire. They couldn't cut fuel fast enough to keep it very big, but it was enough to keep them warm, and could be seen a long way off. The main fire had spread, and off in the distance quite an area of marsh was ablaze.

Anxious and hungry, the boys waited for some sight of rescue. Minutes were like hours, so it seemed longer than it really was when the boys thought they saw a faint glow, back in the direction they had come from. The boys watched eagerly, and as it grew brighter, their faces grew brighter, too.

"That's their signal!" cried Ned eagerly, hugging Jim for joy. "They've seen where we are, and they're after us all right. But see how awfully

we got turned around. Why, we've been hustling off in just the wrong direction. We must be miles from the club-house, that fire looks so faint. That's a bad one on us! "

"What shall we do?" said Jim. "Push for their fire?"

"Not much!" exclaimed Ned. "Wouldn't we have a sweet time plunging into holes and creeks in the dark! I don't suppose they'll have anything but a bonfire. But if it did get away from them, it might catch us in the dry reeds and burn us up. The best thing we can do is just to stick by and keep up this fire, and let them come with lanterns and get us. Let's hustle and make the biggest blaze we can, because it'll be hard enough for them to see anything when they get in the canes. They'll probably have to take our bearings and travel mostly by compass, till they get near. But before we do anything more, we've just got to make a place to set our cameras down. I can't do anything with this big reflex hung around my neck."

It didn't take long to get a pile of stuff gathered big enough to hold up the two cameras and the plates, and then they heaped fuel on the fire as fast as they could work. After about an hour, which seemed more like ten, they heard the faint report of a gun. The boys yelled with all their might, for joy as much as anything else, for they knew their voices wouldn't carry as far as the report of a shotgun.

Every now and then another shot was fired, and each one sounded nearer. It took pretty nearly another hour before they heard a distant hullo, at which they just let themselves loose, the noisiest game that the marsh probably had ever known. Then came the flash of a lantern, and Dad and the warden hove in sight.

Never had the boys been more glad to see Dad, or he them. But this time there was a shadow cast over their enthusiasm by their feeling that they had been very green and kiddish, and had made lots of trouble. Dad welcomed them, of course, but a little soberly.

"I declare, boys," said he, "it does seem as though lately you had developed a wonderful faculty for getting into trouble. If I'd thought you were going to have such dangerous adventures, I doubt if you'd ever have made this trip. How in creation did you get so far astray? Why, you're five miles from the club-house!"

"It's on me, Dad," said Ned frankly. "I changed clothes, and forgot to change the pocket compass too. It came on cloudy, and we got turned all around."

"That was awfully careless," replied Dad, "and I suppose it's the merest chance you had any matches. If you'd forgotten them too, you'd have been in a worse fix yet. I do hope you'll learn from this to be more careful, and remember that out in the wilder-

ness a simple mistake sometimes means death. Now, boys, I don't suppose you're hungry? "

"Well, I should smile!" exclaimed Ned, as both of them looked eagerly at the basket which the warden carried.

"We thought possibly you might be," said Dad, "so we brought some lunch. Now pitch in and eat, we've got at least two hours' tramp before us, and it'll be late before we get back."

The boys responded nobly to that invitation, and were soon ready for the return. Tired though they were, they kept up a steady and active pace, and, when at last they were at the club-house, they were pretty nearly "all in."

As they drank their steaming cocoa and enjoyed the bountiful supper left hot for them, dry and comfortable now, they began to hear the patter of rain on the roof, which soon increased to a roar.

"Just imagine us five miles off there on the marsh!" said Ned reflectively. "Wouldn't we have been about the most miserable half-drowned rats you ever dreamed of?"

"You're right," replied Jim. "This rain makes me feel happy, to think what we escaped. Besides, it's put the fire out, so that won't hurt anybody now."

A mattress and blankets had been spread for the boys on the floor of a separate room, so they could sleep it out in the morning and rest up. One may well believe that after supper the boys were not a great while in making good use of these.

CHAPTER XVI

POTTING THE DUCKS

THE next day there was nothing much doing. For one thing it was stormy. The southeast wind moaned around the corners of the club-house and the rain drove against the windows,—drearily or cozily, according to how one looked at it. Ordinarily it would have been the former to the boys, when it interfered with some delightful plan. Now, however, it was decidedly the latter. There was no call of the wild, no quacking of ducks or honking of geese to make it hard to stay indoors. All that the storm sang was of sleep and rest, a welcome message, because, truth to tell, the boys were just about tired out. This time it was their privilege to lie abed just as long as they wanted to, and they slept till very late.

When they had finally slept it out, and were leisurely stirring, it did seem good for a change to take it easy and run no risks of being blown up or starved to death. The fire made everything dry and comfortable, and there was plenty to do to write up notes and overhaul the cameras and apparatus. Besides this there was another matter of interest.

To-morrow would bring in the New Year, which they hoped to begin with a grand duck hunt, so there would be little time for preparing a New Year's dinner. In view of this Dad proposed that they have it to-day, both to celebrate the opening of the new and the delightful close of the old.

This motion was seconded and carried with a rush. With the cook-stove, plenty of fuel and utensils, a good supply of provisions, and so many great minds at leisure to tackle the problem, it was evident from the start that the dinner would be a big success. So they proceeded to plan it all out. There were still quail left from the hunter's generous gift, and yesterday, in the absence of the boys, the men had gathered in a few ducks, and in the evening the engineer had baked a fine batch of fresh bread. Quail on toast was to be one of the chief attractions, with roast duck for another. At the last stop they had laid in a stock of fresh vegetables from the local gardens, which are in full yield in this country all winter. Dad, for his part, agreed to concoct the most remarkable and luscious tomato soup, for an appetizer, that any of them had ever eaten. For dessert the engineer was equal to the making of a plum pudding, and they had plenty of native oranges aboard.

Too many cooks didn't spoil the broth this time, but they were thick enough to be in each other's way, so the dinner was a little late. However, that was all the better, as it gave all hands fine appetites.

When at last it was ready, it made an imposing sight, served up on the long board table, with newspapers for table-linen. The places were set for three on each side, and, actually, there was a chair for each one. Each of the deep soup plates was now filled with the savory compound, which Dad served out with an air of pardonable pride, and all were haled to the feast.

As they drew up their chairs with one accord and with great anticipations, something entirely unexpected happened. Somehow the chair of the Inspector slipped, as he sat down and tilted it back on two legs. To save himself from falling he grasped the corner of the table. Unluckily, the board which formed that side was loose, not nailed down like the rest, but simply laid in place. Instead of saving himself, he jerked the board completely off, and with it the three plates of soup. In trying to recover, the chair slipped completely out from under him, and down he went whack on the floor, with his own hot soup all over him. The spry boys, who were on the same side with him, jumped just in time to avoid the deluge, but the unfortunate Inspector got it right in the neck, so to speak. There he lay, down and out, squirming in the slippery mess to get up. Sure enough he was *in the soup*! Indeed, it was all over him, and some of it even slopped into his mouth, which happened to be open to utter some exclamation. He was so choked that the remark never lived to be

born, which, perhaps, was just as well, for, under such provocation, it is a question whether it would have been fit to print.

As he arose spluttering and choking, his hair streaming with ruddy soup, as it had been blood, he was greeted with a yell from five lusty pairs of lungs that amounted to a great ovation. Of course it was hard luck to lose the soup, but the show was well worth the price of admission.

"Well, I'll be shot!" exclaimed the warden, laughing so he could hardly control himself. "If you aren't the blamedest looking specimen I ever set eyes on!"

"Say," put in Ned, "I thought you looked old enough to know what soup is for! Don't you know it's made to be taken internally, not externally?"

"You clear out," said Dad, pretending to be angry at the loss of what he had taken so much pains to prepare. "Don't you know this New Year's reception is a full dress affair? How dare you come in here looking like such a guy!"

The Inspector seemed almost dazed as he stood coughing and wiping the soup and red pepper out of his eyes. The fight was completely taken out of him, as with a dog in a biting match when he is soused in the face with a pail of water. "All right, boys," he remarked meekly, as he started for the dressing-room, "I'll take all that's coming to me. When I get cleaned up you can give me anything that's left."

While he was doing this the warden got a pail and mop and went to house-cleaning. Dad washed the three plates, and divided up the remainder of the soup, so they each had a taste after all. When the Inspector appeared again in his new stylish rig, he had to take it on all sides, which he did with becoming good humor. So the dinner went off finely after all, and was pronounced a great success, despite the un-auspicious beginning.

The board had been replaced, and, as they arose and Dad passed around the end of the table, he brushed against the unlucky board and knocked it off again, with an installment of agateware.

"I'm awful glad," said the Inspector with a sympathetic grin, "that you knocked it off; you know misery loves company!"

"I know one thing," put in the warden, in decided tones, "and that is the board has gone without nails just as long as it's going to." With that he strode off, hunted up a hammer and nails, and fastened it on so firmly that Ned thought it would be the last thing of all to go to pieces when the next hurricane blew the club-house to smithereens.

Darkness set in early that night, and all the photographers took advantage of the fine opportunity to change plates, getting all loaded up fresh for the morrow's hunt. Taking one of the side rooms, they spread out their holders and plate-boxes conveniently on the floor, in corners away from the windows.

When all was ready, and each knew just where everything was, Ned shut the door, and hung up a blanket in front of it to keep out all light which came through the cracks, and all went to work. It was so much more convenient to do it here than in the crowded quarters on board the boat.

The weather was now clearing, and it was evident they were in for a good day and an early start. So about eight o'clock, having made all preparations, they turned in.

"Happy New Year!" was the next thing the boys heard. Dark as pitch though it was, they jumped up, Ned lighting the lamp. It was 4 A. M., a fine morning for ducks, with a set of hunters much more eager for them than they would have been the day before. The warden and his assistant had been up for an hour and had breakfast ready, and everything not in use had been packed and taken aboard the boat. Just as quickly as possible they gobbled a light breakfast, and by 4:30 were off.

The exploration of two days before had revealed the fact that in the vicinity of the club-house the ducks were not as plenty as the warden was sure he could find them elsewhere. Of course there were quite a number, but not what he called "thick."

"There's a place, though," he had told them, "over across the bay and up a small bayou, where there's any amount of them, unless I'm mightily mistaken. The hunters baited it with refuse rice this

fall, and once in a while they go in and slaughter the ducks. I reckon they don't mind the bag limit, but it's so wild here we can't catch them. The fellow that lost his dog was telling me they hadn't hunted in there for quite a while, and I'll bet you there's a pile of ducks feeding in around there right now."

So they headed the *Pintail* across the end of the bay. A run of about an hour brought them to the entrance of the bayou, so narrow that it would have been hard to turn the craft around, except with oars from the banks. Fortunately it was moonlight, and they could see to run upstream a couple of miles, when it got too narrow to run further. Here they anchored, and the two boys, with Dad and the warden, took to the skiff, to pole and paddle the rest of the way. In the early twilight, various ducks let them come quite near before they sprang from the water or adjacent marsh and beat it to parts unknown.

Now they came to the place where the bayou began in a not large lake. They could not yet see very plainly, but they could see and hear enough to know that the warden had not missed his guess. The place surely was alive with ducks. Flocks of those nearest at hand flew off, evidently to alight at the further end. They could hear the grunting and quacking of plenty more of them not far beyond. The boys were just as excited as they could be, and Dad about as much as they.

"Say," whispered Ned, "this place is a regular

duck farm. They must be all bunched in here to get that rice."

"Yes," said the warden, "and they want it so badly you can't hardly drive them out. If no gunners come they'll tend in here all way, and give you the best sport that ever was. The best thing to do is to get into that stand just as quick as you can, before it gets real light, you three. I'll leave you there and paddle up to the further end to drive the ducks down this way, and keep them from bedding up there. That'll make them all the thicker for you."

Everyone thought this would be perfectly grand. So they paddled, as quietly as possible, close along shore until they came to a bower of rushes mid-way along the shore of the pond, the place they were looking for. First they anchored out two strings, six in each, of nice wooden decoys. Then, placing in the stand two boxes they had brought for the purpose, and using a thwart to connect them, there were good seats for three, a regular grand-stand from which to witness a star duck-performance. Each had a reserved seat. Ned was allotted the front one, and Dad next, while Jim, whose camera was not very good for rapid snapshot work, took the rear. The warden then paddled off, and they could hear the ducks flushing ahead of him.

"Never mind," said Dad, "they won't go far, and as soon as he gets off they'll be right back. They

know when they have a good thing, and it isn't always that ducks, even down here, get such a treat."

"Isn't it fine," remarked Ned, "that there won't be any gun this time barking behind us and most splitting our ears. The ducks won't be scared now, and I expect they'll come around us like chickens."

"We sha'n't have any to eat if someone doesn't shoot," suggested Dad.

"The warden'll get enough to eat all right," said Ned. "Marketing's one thing and sport's another. Killing ducks isn't anything to the fun we're going to have now without making so much noise about it."

After the warden had been gone a little while the ducks began to come around naturally and without any fear or suspicion, as though they had never dreamed of such a thing as a gunner. It is wonderful how soon these wary birds will become tame when they are not disturbed. The morning mist and twilight had kept most of the ducks from seeing the party arrive, and the boat was now out of the way. The rising sun soon dried up the mist, and for the first time the sportsmen could really see what a wonderful natural game-preserve they were in. Of course, almost from the first, bunches of ducks had been flying by them, but it was too dark for pictures, and the mist made everything appear dim. Now they could see that these occasional flocks were not a circumstance to what there was in the lake.

Everywhere the water was dotted with groups of

ducks, of a number of different kinds. With the strong binoculars they could readily identify many of them as they paddled along, floated quietly on the surface, or tipped up, topsy-turvy, to dabble with their bills in the mud which was within easy reach in that shallow water. How fine the mallards looked, the green heads of the males flashing in the sunlight! There were even more of the pintails, plenty of shovellers, too, yes, and scaups or broadbills, baldpates, gadwalls, some redheads, bunches of diminutive little green-winged teal, and others.

"What are those big dark fellows?" asked Jim, indicating a flock well out in the water.

"Oh, yes," said Dad, as he looked through the glass, "those look like our northern black or dusky duck, but I know they must be the Florida duck, a kind almost like them, except that they are white instead of dark under the chin. They're a very common duck on the Gulf coast, and don't go North in spring like most ducks, but breed all through these swamps. I remember the warden was telling me that in the early fall when the rice is ripening they eat so much that the planters have to hire men to shoot at them to drive them away."

"Well," said Ned, "they're perfectly welcome to bother *us* all they want to. Perhaps they won't mind being shot at with the camera, so we'll take our pay that way."

"I don't wonder they named our boat the *Pintail*,"

said Jim. "Just look at those fellows over there; aren't they pintails?"

"Yes," said Dad, "you're right about that. They look different from all the other ducks, with their slim necks and that long spike of a tail which they hold up out of the water on a slant, as though they were afraid of wetting it. But hush now! Get your camera ready! See that big bunch coming toward us!"

It really was an impressive sight. A flock of forty pintails, pretty well bunched up together swinging up about their side of the pond, headed right for the decoys.

Ned, being out in front, had the best chance, because, without moving, he could poke his camera out, get the flock on his finder and in focus, and follow them as they came. They are rapid fliers, and when they came there was nothing slow about them. As they swung by, broadside on, almost at the decoys, Ned had a fine aim and could see their forms, as he looked down into the hood to the ground glass, strung out large and clear across the plate, on which there was just room for the whole flock. Never could he have got ducks better, and he let drive exactly at the right instant. Just then Dad raised up a bit and let them have it over Ned's shoulder. Even Jim with the small camera had his innings. The ordinary shutter is not fast enough for birds flying directly past one, but will sometimes do quite

well when they are coming nearly head on, that is, if one can guess, by the distance scale at the right focus. Jim set it for fifty feet, and, poking the lens out through a little opening, he snapped them as they were coming. As it turned out, he did remarkably well. It took them all but a moment to change plates and load up again, to be ready for what might at any moment next come along.

They did not have long to wait. A bunch of mallards came in from out in the lake straight for the decoys, heading right towards the blind. It was evident that they planned to alight. They set their wings, slowed up, dangled their legs, and down they went with a splash, just out in front of the "blocks," as the wooden decoys are often called. The way they came gave everyone a clear view, without rising. Dad aimed his camera on Ned's left, and Jim on the right, and all snapped just as the ducks let their legs down.

The fowl were so intent upon the new acquaintances they were about to make that they saw nothing else. Drawing together after alighting, they swam up to the decoys and quacked in a friendly manner. It seemed to surprise them that they got no answer. So comical did it look to see them study and study on those stupid blocks, well painted though they were, that the boys, had it not been for their excitement, would have wanted to laugh right out. But instead they each took a picture of this one-sided

interview. About this time the ducks decided that something must be wrong. Possibly they heard the cameras. At any rate they raised their heads, looked around and then sprang wildly into the air, just before any of the hunters had time to load up.

"Next!" remarked Ned, as he closed the side door of the camera, after drawing the slide. "Ready for business at the old stand! This stand certainly is a dandy."

"I see," said Dad, "you're growing arrogant. Do you think the ducks are obliged to come right along and keep up a steady run of New Year's calls on you all day?"

"Why, surely," replied Ned, "they ought to realize what an unusual lot of hunters this is, shooting without killing or noise. Every duck in the country ought to come up and take a look at this wonderful bunch, and I guess they're going to do it too, by the looks of things. Just see all those ducks out there! They're surely nearer than they were."

"I guess they must see the warden up there somewhere," said Jim, "and think it's safer to drift down wind this way. Probably the gunners planted more rice around the stand, and the ducks must know it. Anyhow it was a fine idea for the warden to go up there to the head of the lake."

"He knows his business all right," said Dad. "He won't do enough to scare them, only just show himself, so they'll swim the other way. This is go-



"A FLOCK OF FORTY PINTAILS . . . HEADED RIGHT FOR THE DECOYS."
(Photograph from life.)

THE NEW YORK
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ASTOR, LENOX AND
TILDEN FOUNDATIONS.

ing to give us some fine pictures pretty soon, to show folks what kind of a duck country we found down here."

Sure enough, the ducks were going to hold a convention in this part of the lake. Various parties of them kept swimming along, and in time the water all around was dotted with them. As there were so many others, none of them now paid any attention to the stupid decoys. If any ducks wanted to be so stiff and distant, they could just poke off to one side and have a little select world all to themselves. As for the rest, they were going to fish up rice, preen their feathers, and just have a good time "chinning" with their neighbors. They didn't though "chew the rag," for ducks don't chew. That was the boys' philosophy of the matter.

There were plenty of ducks in near the stand and many more dotting the water everywhere around. Working quietly, all the hunters got a splendid set of pictures. First they took general views with their doublet lenses. Then to get larger images of single groups they took off the front lens and screwed the back one in the front place. This brought swimming groups up fine and large, giving some wonderful pictures.

The best of all in this line was when a flock of the lesser scaups undertook to develop a mine of rice right up close to the stand. As they swam in nearer and nearer, the party hardly dared to breathe. The

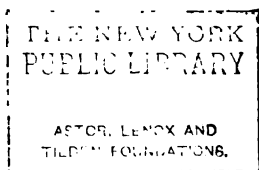
birds were mostly males, and they certainly looked handsome. Above they appear very much like the canvas-back, with penciled gray lines on white background. But their heads are black, with bronzy reflections, and, anyhow, their pale bluish bills give them away, and get them the common name of "blue-bills."

Everyone kept perfectly still, and with eager excitement watched the beautiful birds within a few yards of them, as they swam and dove. These ducks are classed among the marine ducks, which are expert divers. They do not condescend to tip up and dabble, like the fresh-water ducks, but they go all under and stay down long enough to drown any ordinary creature.

At first Ned and Dad did not dare to shoot with their reflecting cameras because the curtain shutters are so noisy. So Jim first tried several with his little silent shutter, to make sure of getting something. Then Dad whispered to Ned to try it. Ned had relaxed the spring of the shutter, so it would go slower and not make so much noise. The single lens brought the ducks up fine and large on the ground glass. Picking out a nice section of the flock, and getting them just right, when all were above water and holding their heads up prettily, he made his first exposure. The ducks heard the sound, for they looked around to see what it was. He was, however, so well draped with the rushes, and kept



"AS THEY SWAM IN NEARER . . . THE PARTY HARDLY DARED TO BREATHE."
(Lesser Scaups. Photograph from life.)



so perfectly still, that their suspicions were calmed, and they went on feeding. It was comical to watch one that had brought up a tender, succulent root of some water-plant, and tried to eat it. The nearer ducks tried to snatch it away, but he dodged and swam off with it, now this way, now that, as he was repeatedly headed off. After awhile one of them snatched it from him and this one in turn had to be chased. Ned got in a fine shot at this affair, an amusing picture of two ducks, one carrying the food in its bill, the other close behind in pursuit. By careful work, so as not to show themselves, the other members of the party got in some shots, as also did Ned some more. Finally so much rustling disturbed the ducks and they swam off. No others came up quite so near, though in all conscience they really out-did themselves and gave wonderful "shots."

"Hullo!" whispered Jim, "here come our old friends, the mud-hens!"

Sure enough, there were a pair of them, in the water to the left, which in the excitement with the broad-bills had been overlooked. Evidently they were going near the decoys and right past the blind. As usual they were bobbing their heads in the familiar, comical way, and their white, ivory-looking foreheads shone in the light. Paying no other attention to the decoys, they swam right along, and, when opposite the stand, received meekly the fusillade from the cameras. They kept on swimming, for it takes con-

siderable inducement to put up a "*poule d' eau*" on the wing, though they can fly well enough when they take a notion to.

Not every time by any means were the hunters, skilled shots though they were, able to bag their game, any more than can gunners always succeed. Even the ducks in the water were subjects requiring much skill. But the flying shots, those are the things which especially win renown, the greatest stunts of camera sportsmanship. Everyone loves a fine photo of fowl in action, and the party were determined to stock up with these now, for they might never again have such chances. For a fact they had about every sort of a chance. Teal whipped by them, as though shot out of a gun, and with all their trying they did not succeed with that active bird, when it came to the test of developing the plates. Flocks surprised them by coming from behind, even when they were keeping a good lookout.

Sometimes even a very good shot was lost by one of those unaccountable blunders. One such was when a splendid bunch of ducks came past the blind. Somehow or other Ned could not seem to find them on his ground glass, and fumbled around till it was too late. Dad jumped up to snap them, and whanged away on his lever, only to find that he had forgotten to wind up the shutter. Jim couldn't see them through the reeds, and so that fine chance was entirely lost. Each one felt like asking the other to

give him a good kicking. However, they got over their chagrin nicely when a flock of spoonbills hovered to the decoys just right, and received a "hammering" that the company will never forget, even though the ducks failed to understand it. So they kept on with their shooting not knowing when to quit, except when their plates should give out. Fortunately they had brought a good supply.

Just in the rear of the stand was an open pool of shallow water with bare muddy shores and flats around it. All this time they had been hearing the pipings of shore-birds and several sorts — kildeers, yellow-legs, small plovers, and several kinds of sand-pipers. Some of these latter now did a curious thing. Apparently tired of feeding, and wanting some exercise, a good large flock of them started up and began to perform evolutions in the air. Flying very rapidly, the whole flock at the same instant would suddenly turn and wheel in another direction. By and by, as they passed, they seemed to have their curiosity aroused by the decoys. At any rate they turned and darted close over the silent blocks that were bobbing and rolling awkwardly in the increasing chop. Fortunately, Ned was ready, and snapped them just right, close over the decoys. They were going so swiftly that it was a masterly shot, and a successful one.

Of course at the time of making these shots one is not sure of the result. Many things may hap-

pen to prevent success,— some mistake of judgment, some accident to material. Every one of a score of things must be done exactly right, for any one blunder may spoil the whole. One must understand every point thoroughly and think quickly, to become a master hand at this sport. And yet many boys, such as Ned, become “cracker-jacks” at it, and get so familiar with every detail that they are reasonably sure, in most cases, whether they have succeeded or not. But of course the darkroom is the only sure test.

After flying around some more, the flock of sandpipers went back to the flat to join the others that were feeding there. Dad now proposed to the boys, since they had done so well with the ducks, to try the shore-birds for a change. The boys were glad enough to stretch their legs, so they got up from the blind and began to wade out over the flat. Their appearance alarmed only a few of the ducks nearest to them, but the others seemed to think that people who did not fire guns were not much to be feared. The shore-birds were quite tame. They ran ahead of the advancing company, probing with their bills in the mud.

“I declare,” said Ned, “those waders make better work with the mud-flats than we do!”

“I should say as much!” responded Jim, as he laboriously pulled his leg out of the ooze in which they were all sinking more than halfway to the knees.

"We'll never catch up with those nimble little fellows at this rate. They can run fifty of their steps to our one."

"Let me propose," put in Dad, "since Ned and I have the reflecting cameras, that we squat down by that bunch of salt grass near the water, and let Jim walk around and head them off. They'll probably come right by us, and the company'll own some fine shore-bird pictures."

Jim was perfectly willing to do the tramping, so he started on, and the rest hid themselves as best they could. Just now the kildeers, which had all the time been making a great outcry, started up and flew off.

"A good riddance!" remarked Dad. "The other birds'll be tamer now without them shrieking so."

This proved to be the case. Jim had got around beyond them, so they turned, and without alarm, as he did not rush them, fed along back toward the grass.

"There's some good stuff for us," whispered Dad. "Those long-legged fellows are the lesser yellow-legs. I've been wanting pictures of them for a long time. Let's see if we can't get one right up close."

There were only a few of the yellow-legs, and they were scattered about singly, feeding busily, and managing their long yellow legs with the utmost grace. It was a pretty sight to watch them. One

was evidently coming right by them, so they kept very quiet, training the cameras upon it as it advanced. The gentle pretty creature must have seen them, but, as they were still, it paid no attention, for it was very busy with the absorbing problem of dinner.

When it was passing by, only about ten feet away, Dad gave the signal, and both cameras went off at the same instant. The honorable yellow-legs gave a start at the sound, but did not fly, and stood gazing in astonishment at the hunters whose guns did not make any more noise than that, and whose shots did not hurt. This gave them just time to make a hurried change of plates and give the yellow-legs another salute, which put it to a short flight.

Quite a flock of sandpipers were now pattering in their direction. Before they came opposite, something started them up, and they flew by, close over the edge of the water, giving another fine wing-shot. They left behind them a Wilson's plover, which did not fly, and soon came piking along on foot. This fellow is the southern small plover, much like the common ring-neck, but with a bigger bill.

"He's our meat," whispered Ned, "if he keeps on the way he's going."

Sure enough, he was a good bird and did just as they wanted, and was duly "shot up" by the two cameras, which ordeal scared him more than it did Sir Yellow-legs.

Just then they heard a shout, and, looking up, they saw the warden in the boat headed back towards them, a great lot of fowl between him and them.

"Run!" exclaimed Dad, loud enough for Jim to hear, "and get into the blind. The warden's driving a whole raft of birds down to us!"

It was tiresome work to wriggle their legs so fast through the sticky mud, but they dodged, panting, into the blind, just as the host began to take the wing, and bore down upon them. They seemed to be about half and half ducks and mud-hens. The ducks flew first and more swiftly, and came stringing by the blind in wild confusion. It was hard to decide instantly which bunch to take, but each of them made a try, hardly knowing what kinds they were shooting at. The mud-hens waited as long as possible, and then, compelled to fly, went hurtling by the stand in scattered ranks, their heavy lobed feet dangling out ridiculously behind. By this time the plates had been changed, and a fusillade greeted them, too.

This was just about the last of their plates, so, when the warden came, they pulled up the decoys and paddled back to the *Pintail*. There they found a good dinner waiting for them. As they ate, they gave an account of the hunt, and all agreed that it was the best duck hunt and the most exciting New Year's Day yet.

CHAPTER XVII

THE TRAPPERS OF TIGER OAKS

“**N**OW,” said Dad, as they were finishing their ample feed, “it strikes me that we’ve done up this part of the country brown, and I don’t see why we hadn’t better push right along and get down to the ‘Tiger Oaks’ and try to save those poor fellows from having their pastures all rooted up by those hordes of geese. What say you, Captain, to starting right now?”

“That’s my idea,” replied the warden. “We can travel till dark, anyway, and do the rest of it tomorrow. It’s quite a piece down there, and mighty hard going through those shallow bayous. I only hope there’ll be water enough to let us through.”

Pulling up the anchor, they managed to turn the *Pintail* around with oars, and soon were out again in the bay. After following the shore some miles to the south’ard, they ran into another bayou which finally led out into a large shallow lake. The warden used his best judgment as to where the supposed channel was. All the time, however, the keel was dragging in the mud, and presently, when headway was

almost stopped, the warden, fearing they would stick there for good, had the engineer reverse and back out into deeper water.

"I don't know about this business," said the warden dubiously. "It looks as though there wasn't any water in here. If we got stuck hard and fast in here, we mightn't get out for a week. The tides in here don't amount to anything, and there won't be much difference till the moon changes, or we get a southerly blow. I'll try once more, though, round the other side of the island."

The engineer started up, and she went dragging along, about as before. Suddenly the water shoaled. Before the engineer could stop, she was hard and fast aground. All the backing he could do didn't budge her an inch.

"O, dear!" sighed Jim, "perhaps we shan't get to Tiger Oaks at all now! I'm sure I don't want to stick here for a week."

"The tide's flowing a little," said the warden, "and I think in a couple of hours we can manage to back off. There's another way to get to Tiger Oaks, but it's further. We can't do much more, though, to-night."

Mullets were jumping out of the water around them, so the boys tried fishing for them, to pass away the time, though the warden said they wouldn't bite, and he was right.

"Now, boys," said the warden, at length, "put

up your lines and get the oars out of the skiff, and we'll see if we can't shove out of this."

The boys were glad enough to try. They, and all hands, pushed on the oars, except the engineer, who put on full power to go astern. At first there was nothing doing, but, after some frantic efforts, she began to move in jerks, and finally slid off the bar. Now they could turn, and the engineer ran her back into the mouth of the bayou where the water was deeper. It was almost dark now, so they anchored there, proposing to spend the night.

"I hate awful to stay here," remarked the warden, "because we'll be eat up by these mosquitoes, but if we stay out in the pond we might be hard aground in the morning, no telling."

"Oh, we'll be all right in here," said Ned, with a tone of assurance. "There can't be many mosquitoes at New Year's time."

"You won't talk that way by to-morrow, boy," remarked the warden. "I've been in this country more than one New Year's. The reason you haven't seen any more's because it's been cool. But to-day's come off warm again, the way it is half the time down here in winter. I'll bet you the thermometer's most up to seventy right now, this late. The insects get torpid when it's cool. But one good warm day thaws them out, and at night they come around enough so you'll know it. See, they're buzzing around already.

They'll keep us busy all right, and we haven't any screens either."

After supper there wasn't much to do except to turn in and try to sleep, especially as it was a poor plan to have any lights to attract the mosquitoes. So they took to their cozy bunks — that is the three residents did. The three photographers had still a job ahead of them, to change a big batch of plates in the dark, so they got out their plate-boxes and holders. Spreading things out conveniently in the bunks, they went to work, stopping frequently to slap at the mosquitoes, which were pouring into the cabin in regiments.

"Wow!" exclaimed Jim, "that fellow hurt!"

"You just wait till you try to go to sleep," said the engineer, "and see how easy it is!"

Ned was the last of all to get through his work, and toiled on after the others had finished, for he had used up more plates than anyone.

"He's the greatest night worker," said the warden, "that I ever ran across — except the mosquitoes, maybe. Most every time I go to sleep, he's working away in the dark."

Once ready for bed, all hands took hold at trying to drive out the mosquitoes with a smudge of burnt coffee on the oil-stove. When the smoke got most out, they shut up the hatchway, even at the risk of bad air.

The plan didn't work for a cent. Either a lot of them stayed in, or else more *got* in. Anyhow, between the tormentors and the heat, it was pretty bad. The boys tried covering all up except their noses, but the mosquitoes liked noses as well as anything else. For hours everyone was turning and thrashing, muttering dire threats.

Finally the warden sat up, lighted the lantern, and threw open the hatchway for a breath of air. "The rest of you can snooze all you like," he said, "but I've got just all I want. I'm going to get out of here!"

"What, and leave us here to be eaten by cannibals?" said Ned. "We don't know how to get to Tiger Oaks."

"Oh, no," said the warden, "you'll all go along too. Come, engineer, give her some gasolene and let's start for Tiger Oaks now. It's midnight. We'll run back the way we came into Little Vermilion Bay, and take the other cut that's deeper, into Big Vermilion. Across that there's a place they call 'Hell-Hole,' where they say there's geese too. We might call there and see, as we go along. Probably we'll get there about daybreak."

"Warden, I say you're a bully fellow!" cried Ned. "That's the stuff. Hell-Hole is it, isn't it, Dad? What a corking old place that must be!"

"Yes," said Dad, "that strikes me as a very fine plan. I'm in for it."

With a whoop the boys were out on deck, not stopping to dress, and had the old mud-hook aboard in two jiffies. The engineer cranked his wheel, and they were off up the bayou. By this time the moon had set, but there was enough star-light to keep them from sticking the *Pintail's* bill into the steep muddy banks. It was not long before they were out of the bayou again, in Little Vermilion. The mosquitoes were mostly left behind, and what few remained in the cabin the boys killed off in short order.

"Now, boys," said the warden, "why don't you and the other gentlemen turn in and finish out your nap. I'm the only one that knows the course, so I'll steer, and the rest of you might just as well take things easy and be comfortable."

Sure enough, it was getting rather monotonous to sit and peer out into the darkness, so all hands followed the good advice. The next thing the boys knew the gray dawn was peeping in through the cabin windows. This routed them out in a hurry and they were on deck for a look. Dim outlines of land lay not very far ahead of them. Questioning the warden they found that they had run through a channel leading out from Little Vermilion into Vermilion Bay proper, and now, after a run of some fifteen miles across that, were approaching Hell-Hole.

The very mention of this sent the boys up on the

foreward part of the "house" to make observations. As yet there was nothing especial to see, nothing at all lurid.

"What makes them give the place such a name?" Ned inquired of the warden, who was steering there by the open window foreward.

"I don't rightly know," answered the warden. "There's a bayou makes in here, and there's lots of bars and flats, a bad place to get in and out, if anyone wants to. That's the only reason I know. But I don't know who would ever want to go there anyhow but gunners and trappers!"

"Doesn't anyone live there?" asked Jim.

"I don't know of anybody except a few trappers that have shanties scattered around. There's only one of them right there at Hell-Hole. I thought we'd anchor off there and go ashore and ask him about the game."

Just as they anchored off this remarkable spot the sun decided it was time to be stirring, and rose majestically like a golden ball out over the placid waters of the bay, touching up the waters, as it already had the imposing masses of purple clouds, tinting them like roses. Marsh and water and sky all were at their best, and poor old Hell-Hole never looked grander in its life, seeming to protest against having a bad name prejudice the visitors against it. Even animate Nature came to the rescue, for the honking of geese broke upon the silent air, and a

stately flock of over a hundred of them, in double wedge formation, passed overhead, flying eastward. When they were almost out of sight they changed their course and scaled down low over the marsh, evidently about to alight.

This looked promising and made them hurry all the more to go ashore and make inquiries. The warden let the boys go with him. The shanty stood there at the entrance of the bayou, in plain sight, and pretty soon they were knocking at the door. Nobody responded, so they pounded harder, to wake up the sleepers, but in vain.

"It's no use," said the warden, "they're off to their traps somewhere, and there's no telling where they are."

Returning on board, they held a consultation, and unanimously decided that, since it was uncertain here just where they should find the geese, and as they had sure information about Tiger Oaks, they had better not waste time here, but push on for their destination. So up anchor was the programme, and breakfast en route.

Following the shore eastward for a few miles, they came to a fine broad outlet, with swift current and comparatively deep water. This was South-West Pass, leading out into the Gulf — not the pass of the same name of the Mississippi River, but another one. When they turned into the Pass, with the help of such a current the *Pintail* fairly flew.

"I don't suppose she's going as fast as the flock of pintails we snapped yesterday," remarked Ned, "but she's going some, just the same, fast enough for us. Say, but this is just great, isn't it!"

This channel was quite a place for birds. Gulls and royal terns were flying around, flocks of brown pelicans were sitting on sand-bars, and individuals were busy with their fishing. At one place, as they approached a shoal, they saw a company of large birds that did not look like pelicans. They were black, and sat straight and in line, like a squad of soldiers.

"Florida cormorants," announced Dad, as he got the glasses focused on them. "They're shy fellows, and pretty soon you'll see them clear out. They're hard birds to photograph. I've seen just one in my life that acted tame, that is, except in rookeries where they were nesting. This was in the harbor of St. Petersburg, Florida, where they protect the birds. The pelicans there were tame as old hens, but the cormorants were as wild as ever, all except one. This poor fellow had part of his bill broken off, probably by a shot. I guess he couldn't catch fish for himself, so he turned beggar, like the pelicans. Tourists were most always fishing off the wharf, and the pelicans, and sometimes this cormorant, would swim right up below the tourists and try to grab the fish from the lines when the tourists hooked them and went to pull them out of the water.

When the fish proved too small to keep, the tourists would throw them to the birds, to see them catch the fish in their bills as they fell. I remember when I took the steamer away that this old cormorant swam right up alongside, and opened his mouth to beg for food."

"I don't see," said Ned, "why people everywhere can't treat birds that way, and get them tame like that. Wouldn't it be just great to have all these wild things act so!"

"It certainly would be fine," said Dad, "but I suppose it'll be a long time before most people wake up to that."

Another hour, and they were rounding a sandy point out into the Gulf of Mexico. They changed the course then to the westward, keeping about a mile off shore, for a final run of a dozen miles or so.

"Hullo, see those birds coming!" suddenly exclaimed the warden.

Looking in the direction he pointed, directly ahead, all spied the long line of great white birds, with only the ends of the wings black, high up in the air. Instantly there was a frantic rush and scramble for the cameras, which were always kept where they could be quickly reached, sometimes all set and ready for an emergency.

This was the time when Ned had the best of it. His camera was lying on the bunk ready for instant use, plate in, slide drawn, and shutter set. All he

had to do was to grab it and tumble out on deck. The pelicans were now pretty close, and not yet quite overhead, which gave the best possible view of the whole flock, showing the way the big birds were lined up. Dad was not so fortunate. He had to stop to put a slide in, and in other ways get ready. By the time he got out on deck, the flock had passed over, and, when he finally aimed and focused, they were so far away that it didn't matter much whether he snapped or not, though he did it to try to have something to show.

"That's a good one on you!" laughed Ned. "You've been talking to me about being ready for sudden calls, and now you're the one to get left."

"I'm glad you were the one who was ready," said Dad encouragingly, "and I'm especially glad that *some* one got that fine shot, which will make a splendid subject I've wanted for a long time. We'll certainly count on you as our minute man."

This was the only exciting episode that occurred on the run along this strip of Gulf coast. Neither was there anything startling about the scenery,—nothing but salt marsh, with an occasional bit of sandy beach. But they bowled merrily along, rocking in the cradle of the Gulf pretty vigorously, since their course kept them following the trough of the swells.

"Say, warden," said Dad, "what's the matter with you? You look kind of pale around the gills."

"I'm sort of ashamed to tell you," answered the warden, "but, to tell the truth, I'm an inland boatman, and this rolling pretty near puts me out of commission."

"Never mind," said Ned, laughing, "you go to bed and we'll handle the boat all right. When we get down where the geese are thick as hops we'll call you."

"I'm afraid, boy," said the warden, "that you won't find the geese as easy as all that. You'd be glad enough by and by to have me crawl out. But I reckon I won't be sick enough to go to bed. We'll go ashore pretty soon. See that bunch of timber 'way off there. That's Tiger Oaks, and an hour'll put us off there all right."

This was good news, and the glasses were kept busy scanning this new Eldorado. As they approached they could see that the place was practically an island out on the seaward edge of a boundless marsh. It was a strip of live-oaks, perhaps two miles long, with a house peeping out among them here and there. Certainly it was an isolated spot for people to live.

When they were opposite the middle of this strip they came to anchor, nearly half a mile off the beach, as the water was shoal and the bottom might not be very good holding-ground. Before going ashore they must get dinner. The warden, though, poor fellow, had entirely lost his appetite, and even worse,

for he confided to the engineer that even the sight of food was almost more than he could stand. So it was voted to let the warden fight shy of the bread-line, and the rest of the crowd pitched in and got up a meal that they were not ashamed of.

While they were preparing it they saw a boat coming toward them from the shore. In it were two men, one of whom proved to be the older hunter whom they had met back at Abbeville. He greeted the company very cordially, as he and his neighbor climbed aboard.

"How about the geese?" inquired Dad, as soon as greetings and introductions were over. "We haven't seen but precious few so far. I hope we shan't get left on them down here."

"You needn't worry about not finding geese down here," he replied. "What we people worry about is because we *do* find them. There are thousands and thousands of them, this very minute, out yonder," pointing towards the marsh beyond the western end of the oak timber. "They're destroying our pasture-land worse than ever, and we've clubbed together and hired two young fellows to drive them off. We pay them a dollar a day apiece, besides furnishing board, ammunition and horses. It keeps them busy chasing those flocks. When they shoot at them in one place they just fly along a mile or two and start in again. You'll see the damage they do when you get over there. They eat the grass

and tear it up by the roots, so there isn't anything left but a pond or a mud-flat after they get through."

"What kind of geese are they?" inquired Dad.

"There's all kinds," answered the man, "but most of them are these brants with white necks."

On hearing this the boys began to caper with delight, and Dad looked as much pleased as they.

"We've certainly struck the headquarters for blue geese at last," he said, "and I believe we're going to have a wonderful time here. It sounds as if this was their great gathering place for all this part of the State. That's the reason why we haven't seen any more. They're all bunched down here. Well, that certainly is splendid. It means the full success of our trip, especially if no one else has got on to it."

"By the way, neighbors," continued Dad, turning to his visitors, "have any people been down here looking up these geese?"

"No," replied their first acquaintance, "not yet, but I just had a letter, when I saw you up in Abbeville, from a gentleman in Washington, saying he was coming down with a party the last of this month to study geese, and wanted to know if it was true what some hunters had told him about the geese out here. If it was, they'd like to get accommodations to stay awhile. I wrote him to come ahead, because there was any quantity of the blooming things, and we all hoped they'd bring some gatling guns and clean out the whole mess of them."

The boys tried not to give away their thoughts and feelings, but they looked at one another and grinned. Things were certainly coming their way all right. Here were all the geese they wanted, and here was pretty conclusive evidence that they were first on the field and were to reap the honors of discovery.

"I say," put in the warden, addressing the visitors, "I don't want to be inhospitable, but whenever you go ashore, I want to go along with you. I just can't stand it much longer to roll about in this swell. Dry land never looked so good to me as it does right now."

"Well, but see here, Warden," said Dad, "you're not going to rush these guests off without dinner. We've heard such a lot about Southern hospitality that we want to show people we've got some up our way too. Dinner's all ready, and plenty of it. You go lie down, Warden, where you won't see it, and we won't keep you aboard a great while. Come, gentlemen, sit down with us, and keep us company. We're glad enough to see you!"

It was impossible to resist such urging, or such famous cooking, so, after some protestations, the men agreed to stay.

"I want to tell you gentlemen one thing right now," said Dad. "On some boats they'd offer you something stronger than what we've got. I don't know how you feel about it, but we don't use liquor

in any form, because we don't like it, and we're against it on principle. But if you like strong coffee the engineer here can fix you some strong enough to hold up a house."

"You're just my style, friend," answered the older man. "I haven't any more use for liquor than you have. Some of the boys down here drink some once in a while, but some of us don't ever touch it, and I'm one. We're honest, hard-working folks, and that sort of business isn't in our line. Coming down the bayou the other day we saw a boat where they'd have been better off without it."

"Yes," exclaimed Jim, "we saw them and they were in a fine pickle, for sure!"

"If we were that kind," remarked Ned, "we'd be seeing spooks instead of geese. I guess we'd be about the only geese we'd be able to find."

All pitched in now with a will, and dinner was quickly disposed of. All hands were then ready to go ashore, particularly the dinnerless warden. The visitors managed to stow him in their skiff, and the tender held the rest of the party, though it was too full for comfort and almost for safety, had the sea not been quite calm. Of course the long swell broke upon the shore, but there was a nice little creek into which they could run and thus avoid landing on the open marshy flat.

Dad decided that it was best not to try to photograph geese till next morning. The principal reason

was that the sky had become overcast, so the light was not good. There were plenty other things to do and see. Morning was the best time for the geese, according to the men, because more of them came in at night, and early in the morning, before they scattered, one could get the greatest sights of the whole day. On the other hand, it was important to get the work done up at the first opportunity, for, should the weather get bad, it would not do to be caught out there on the open coast in a comparatively small craft. But the wind was light and in the west, the indications were that these clouds would pass and that there would be fine weather on the morrow. The cameras, though, were carried to get pictures of the locality.

When they got ashore they found a pleasant-looking country, with a nice little settlement of neat houses under the shade of the green live-oaks, which, as always in this part of the world, bore their burden of gray moss. Their friend conducted them to his house and introduced them to his wife and a nice family of young folk of both sexes. One of them, Bert, was a boy about the age of Ned and Jim. He had a nice face, bright and lively, and the boys took to him at once.

Out in the pasture back of the house were quite a bunch of horses, and they were told that they had others out on the range. All the families down here raise cattle and horses, besides their farming and

trapping. They plant crops enough for their own use, and a number of kinds of vegetables were now growing in the gardens. Oranges grew well, and the boys were invited to help themselves, which they were glad enough to do.

"Say, fellows," put in Bert, "do you like to ride horseback?"

"Sure thing!" said Ned. "If we got an invitation, we shouldn't need any urging."

"All right, then," Bert went on, "you've both got one right now. Everybody rides down here. We never think of walking a mile. We just catch a horse, and there you are. See those horses in the lot? Well, we've got all the saddles we want, too."

"Do they buck?" inquired Jim. "If they do, I'll choose shanks' mare."

"You needn't worry about that," said Bert, "they're all well broken."

So, taking a pan of feed, he went into the enclosure, and, one by one, caught horses for each of them, and one for Dad, who wanted to go along too. When the saddles and bridles were on they started off in gay spirits. They hadn't gone far when they met half a dozen young fellows also out on horseback for a little fun. For awhile our party rode along with them, asking them about the country and hearing about their doings. Two of them, they found, were the fellows who were hired to keep the geese out of the pastures. They had their guns with

them and had come in for the night, as they had driven the geese quite a way out on the marsh. One of them worked at the west and the other at the east end of the settlement.

Bert explained to them what the party had come for, and said that his father had sent them word through him not to disturb the geese for the present, until the visitors had got all the pictures they wanted.

"I hope, fellows," said Ned, "that the geese won't clear out just yet till we've had our try at them."

"No danger of that," answered one of them. "They'll be back there in the pasture to-morrow just as sure as you're alive."

"How do you like hunting geese for a business?" inquired Jim.

"It's the biggest snap I ever struck," he replied; "a lot easier than tending traps. It's so easy that the folks have the laugh on us. They call us 'scare-geese,' after 'scare-crow,' and poke all manner of fun at us. But we don't care."

Bidding the young fellows good-by, they now rode out toward the west end of the "tiger oaks," following a road through the fine great trees. As they approached the end of this "island" they began to hear the clamor of geese, just one great undertone, like surf beating on the shore, which grew louder

and louder as they advanced. The boys were tremendously impressed and excited.

"If they sound as loud as that away out there," ejaculated Ned, "I should think you folks wouldn't be able to sleep nights when they come on to the pasture!"

"Oh, we get used to it," said Bert, "but there's sure an awful lot of 'em. I never saw anything like it anywhere else."

They were now at the end of the island, on the edge of the marsh. Looking off over the vast expanse, they could see distant flocks of geese in the air, flying up and alighting further on. Some flocks were beginning to come in for the night from other feeding-grounds. Now and then there would be a tremendous uproar, and a great mass of them, covering acres, would rise up like a black cloud. It made the boys just wild, and Dad was as much excited as they. There was no mistake made in coming here. It was surely the national convention headquarters of the blue geese. It looked as though about all the blue geese on earth might be assembled here in noisy convocation. Occasionally a detachment flew in their direction, as though to see whether the "scare-geese" had gone and had given them a chance at the coveted pasture.

The boys would gladly have pushed out on the horses over the marsh in pursuit, to get a better view,

but Dad decided it was wisest not to alarm them, so as to be sure of working them successfully in the morning.

The twilight was now approaching, so they rode back to the ranch and all hands went aboard, to get ready for the crowning day of the whole trip.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE WINNING OF THE WILD GOOSE CHASE

IT took the boys unusually long to get to sleep that night, for matters were getting to the point of white heat, not the thermometer, for it was comfortably cool out on the Gulf of Mexico in January, but the excitement of being on the verge of such success and of witnessing sights such as, before they made the expedition, they never even dreamed of. Another thing which added to their happiness was that the weather had entirely cleared. As they tossed in their bunks, the bright stars peeped in at them through the port-holes, and, winking at them, seemed to say —“ geese, geese, geese.”

After a while, however, sleep overcame them, and the next thing they knew was when the warden called them at four o'clock. The sun would rise about seven. Dad wanted to allow an hour for dressing, breakfast, and getting ashore, another hour for getting where the geese were, and the hour before sunrise for hiding in a good place, before it got too light. The cameras and equipment had been carefully overhauled the night before, and every last plate-holder

refilled, so that the camera-hunters were practically "armed to the teeth."

In the dark of 5 A. M. the warden set the three ashore and left them his friendly blessing as he started back to go aboard and finish out his nap with the other men.

Groping across the strip of marsh to dry land, with especial care not to fall into the ditches and put their precious outfit out of commission, they found the road. All these plates and cameras were pretty heavy, and the jaunt seemed a very different story from what they made it on horseback. There was plenty of time, so they took it rather leisurely. A screech owl, perched up in one of the "tiger oaks," treated them to his tremulous serenade. A faint blush of dawn was beginning to show and roosters were starting keen competition with the bird of night.

Long before they reached the edge of the marsh the cries of the geese began to be heard, and when they really came to it the noise was quite bewildering. It came like a mystery out of the gloaming, spread out everywhere, and yet from an invisible source. Fortunately this marsh was not like the others where they had explored. There seemed to be a different bottom, quite firm after one had sunk a little way, and in some places one hardly sunk at all. In fact the trappers are able to go on horseback over their routes and thus cover far more territory than those with whom the boys had had experience.

In consultation with the hunters the day before, everything had been carefully planned. They were not to try to get too near, so as to alarm the whole body of geese and drive them out before it was light enough for pictures. If they were very near, the geese would surely see them as soon as it got fairly light. It seemed that low bushes, some species of mangrove, grew in tracts on the marsh, averaging about waist high. The proper thing to do was to get as far as the main body of geese, and keep some distance inland from them, to the north. This would be in their line of flight. The habit of the geese was to gather at some place on the marsh in immense numbers, many thousands, not in any one compact mass, but each lot by itself, yet not far from the next lot. These individual flocks varied in size all the way from about two dozen to over two hundred. Though geese migrate by night to some extent, their usual custom is to rest quietly by night, doing some feeding in the immediate vicinity. At the coming of day they get more noisy, chattering glibly as they stand together and make their toilets for the day. When the sun is fairly up, or sometimes before, lot after lot in turn will rise and fly off to new feeding-grounds. In this case, the flocks generally took pretty much the same general course to the north and east. By hiding as described, they would probably get in the line of flight and the geese would pass low over their heads. In this way the hunters get a great

many before the geese all find out where they are. But with the silent camera-shooting the sport ought to last quite a while.

As they struck out over the marsh toward the geese, they came to a place where, for quite a distance there was no grass at all, firm damp ground entirely spare of vegetation.

"Aha!" exclaimed Dad. "Here is one place where the geese have destroyed the pasture. The hunters told me yesterday that we'd see these places when we got out from the sandy soil a little way. This is the best pasturage, where it isn't so wet as further out on the marsh. The cattle like it best, and so do the geese."

As they went on they found that there were acres and acres of this spoiled pasturage. The geese had alighted down there in thousands to feed and had pulled up all the grass, roots and all, so there was nothing left to grow.

"I don't wonder," remarked Ned, "that these people hate geese. I suppose they can't hardly realize that most other people never saw a wild goose in their lives and think it would be a wonderful sight to see even one."

"We'll see them all right to-day," said Jim. "My, but what a racket! Honk, honk, ker-honk, all the time. There're thousands of them doing it if there's one!"

Tramping out over the marsh for nearly a mile

they reached a spot that seemed to be just about right. Here there were clumps of bushes which would hide them very nicely.

The racket of the geese was going on so loudly that it kept the boys in a state of great excitement all the time. But now, when off to the north they heard another big clamor, they were, if possible, even under greater tension. Yes, the shouting was nearer, those geese were coming their way, no doubt to join the big assemblage.

"Keep down, boys, be very still, don't move," exclaimed Dad. "Never mind the cameras. We don't want them to see us yet and alarm the rest. It's too dark yet for pictures."

In a couple of minutes they began to see dark forms outlined against the sky, but yet low down, just a few yards above the marsh, a great extended line, headed right for them. This showed that the party had chosen their position exactly right in the flight-line.

To the boys crouching behind the bushes it seemed almost alarming to have such a host of great creatures flying right at them, yelling like a lot of wild Indians. When the critical instant came and the geese were almost upon them, instinctively they all tried to crouch even lower. Each hoarse honk seemed to be uttered as a threat to them to get out of the way. By this time the geese were but a few feet above the tops of the bushes, getting ready to alight. Then, with a mighty rush of wings, and the

full barking chorus, they raced over the heads of the hunters, and in a moment more had alighted on the marsh with an even greater uproar, which was almost lost in the far louder din when the assembled multitudes gave the newcomers their salute.

As the light increased it became possible to see many of the geese, though they were hidden by the grass and bushes. Evidently they were getting restless and preparing to move off. Now and then a flock would start up with a noisy uproar, but alight again nearby. Those that they could see on the ground stood in long ranks, preening their feathers and talking to one another. Their light under parts showed them off in contrast to the dark hues of the marsh. Occasionally there were white ones, and it became plain that these were snow geese, all white except for the black end of the wings. There were not many of these, but a few were scattered among the flocks.

"I understand now," said Dad, "why Audubon thought these blue geese were the young of the snow goose. Naturally there would be more young than old birds, so he thought that the darker ones were the young with their parents."

Some of the geese on the marsh were evidently Canada geese because of their great size, which the field-glasses, when it became light enough to use them, showed was the case. But the great majority were the blue geese.

Another thing, now, was noticeable, that on this part of the marsh were many small ponds. In fact, the geese generally were gathered along the shores of some of these. Dad now called the boys' attention to the cause for so many ponds, as told him by the hunters. This part of the marsh was a little lower than the bare parts they had first found, just about on sea level, at high tide. The geese dig many holes when they are after the roots. These get trampled down into a hollow which fills with water, making a shallow pond. One special reason why the geese are attracted to this part of the marsh is that the cattle-men burn it over to get rid of all the dead stuff, and give the new grass a chance to spring up green. The geese are eager for this tender grass and can better get at the roots where the old stuff is not in the way. The cattle-men claim that the geese have practically ruined two thousand acres of their pasture-land, about three square miles, which gives an idea of the immense numbers of geese that there really are.

A little before sunrise a few flocks had left the company and flown back over the great marsh, all of them passing within good view of the hidden hunters, a couple of them quite close.

At last now the golden ball of the sun began to peer above the marsh, and in a short time there was light enough to ply the cameras. Just then, with a tremendous honking, a large detachment of the

geese flapped into the air, and, after a preliminary circling, headed right for the hunters. Great excitement now reigned in camp. Squatting low in the bushes, which were very wet with dew, they waited till the geese were fairly within range.

"Sit up, boys, and give it to them!" whispered Dad.

As they rose the geese saw them and swerved, but they were near enough for good work.

"Plague take it!" exclaimed Ned. "I can't get them on my finder. It all seems kind of blurry."

He worked his focusing screen back and forth, trying to get the range, and the rest were doing the same. Somehow they could not focus, and the geese passed along. This was fairly maddening and set them to looking at their cameras. The explanation was very easily found. The dampness in the air and the dew on the bushes had wet the lenses, making a veil of fog over them, through which almost nothing could be seen.

"That was a bad blunder," said Dad regretfully. "We ought to have had more sense. I guess all these geese have addled our brains. We'll fix them yet, though. There are thousands more to come out. Here's the next bunch now!"

They could hear another great commotion among the thousands of geese, which set them to working all the faster to wipe dry their lenses, both inside and out, each having taken out his front-board. Of

course haste makes waste, and Ned dropped one of his lenses on the wet ground. However, he got it wiped and back in place by the time it was needed. All were again down low, and perfectly still.

This time Dad did not give the word till the geese were nearly upon them. Even then they did not have to move much, for they had been aiming at the flock through the chinks in the bushes, keeping it in focus as it came. All they had to do was to move clear of the foliage and let drive.

"Oh, but don't they look just fine on the ground glass!" exclaimed Ned. "What stunning pictures they'll make!"

It is very seldom that geese go alone when there is plenty of company about, and so the boys were much surprised to see one lone blue goose flying towards them. It was coming in to join their friends, and flew so near that Ned and Dad tried it, so as to have a portrait of a blue goose to enlarge.

"You poor lonely thing," said Jim; "where in the world have you been all this time? Did you get lost, strayed, or stolen? Maybe you got your toes in one of the trappers' muskrat traps, and you're late to school. Hustle in there and learn your lessons!"

Anyhow it had done them a good turn, for it came very close, so that it was bagged by the cameras, in good shape to take to Connecticut.

"I suppose," said Ned, "that Connecticut would

be a stranger place to that goose than the wildest country around the shores of the Arctic Ocean. I just wish we could swop off with it, and go where it goes as easily as it can, or as we can go to *our* homes."

"You wouldn't want to go the way the geese go, if everybody was shooting at you," said Jim.

"I wouldn't care if they shot me the way I'm shooting them!" retorted Ned.

Really, the more the geese flew out, the more there seemed to be left behind. A hundred of them would get out of a place where not one was in sight, and then another bunch from an unlikely place. It almost seemed as though they were being made to order, or as though the ground opened up and let them out from some sort of a reservoir. But for the noise one would not suppose there could be nearly so many geese that near, because the grass hid so many of them from view. If one could only have climbed up in a tree, it would have been a great sight. But there was not a tree on all this great marsh.

Before the sun had been up half an hour, there was a great stir and scattering among the geese. Only one flock at a time took its departure, a good deal as classes in a school are dismissed. But if the school had been as noisy as this assemblage, something would have happened! Each flock had to

make just so much noise, and all the thousands left behind had to bid it farewell. About as soon as one flock got well away, another was ready to start, and so the shoutings of the geese had hardly a moment's let-up.

There was little pause, either, for the battery of cameras. To be sure not all the flocks came within good range, but many of them did. The excitement of the whole thing was perfectly intoxicating,—to hear the announcing clamor of the geese, to see them rise, head toward the hunters, come nearer and nearer, until they swept with a rush overhead, while eagerly the cameras were aimed and the decisive shots fired. The geese often came so near that the boys could see their eyes, and all their markings, and recognize the blue geese from other kinds. It was just as satisfying thus to see, to get them clear on the ground glass, and feel the thrill of a successful exposure, as to see the poor things fall, broken-winged, to earth.

“It depends so much upon the training,” thought Dad, as he watched the eagerness and delight of the boys. “If I’d had a camera when I was a boy, and had been encouraged to use it the way these boys have, I don’t believe I’d ever have caught that shooting craze, to kill every live wild thing. With all this splendid new incentive and the instruction given in the schools, there will surely be a wonderful change

for the better in the near future. We shall still kill to eat, but fewer and fewer will take life for the fun of it."

Somewhere about eight o'clock things began to quiet down, most of the geese having left. For all that, though, there were hundreds, here and there in small flocks, which were content to stay, possibly those that had come in late, and a flock, now and then, came in to join them. It seemed a good time, now, to try to stalk some of these flocks. So, having got their cameras all ready for instant use, the trio began sneaking through grass and bushes, bending down low so as to keep out of sight from the geese.

The geese, though, seemed to have chosen their feeding-ground in view of this very danger. Out where they were there were few bushes, and the grass was short, so it was impossible to approach them without being seen. Before the hunters were within several gunshots the geese had become alarmed and were off to alight further on, by the edge of one of the pools, and stand with their long necks stretched up, watching to see what the party would do next. Clearly it would be a wild goose chase to pursue them in this way.

As they walked along, discussing what they should do next, a brown bird darted out of the grass before them, and, with a squeaking cry, made off rapidly low over the marsh, to alight a couple of hundred yards further on.

"Here's some game for us!" exclaimed Dad; "a nice Wilson's or jack snipe, one of the fine game-birds. Let's try for him. I guess the shot we have in for geese isn't too big! Did you hear what it said? The books make it say 'scaip, scaip.' But it always makes me think of 'escape, escape,' because it succeeds so well, with that quick, darting flight. Perhaps he'll escape us, but there's no harm in trying what we can do."

Each of them had marked down carefully where the snipe had alighted. To make sure of not losing it, in case it had run to one side, they spread out a little, and advanced. The bird had run ahead some, so they didn't know exactly when or where to expect it. Suddenly it jumped right in front of them, giving them quite a surprise. There was precious little time to aim and focus, but the hunter with the camera, just as the gunner, has good training in quickness. Both Ned and Dad, with their reflex cameras, got in their shots before the snipe had gone five feet. It alighted again, about as before, and they followed it up again, so as to get more than one iron in the fire, in case the first exposures should prove failures, as with such a difficult subject they were more than likely to do. Just as they had flushed the snipe again and got in the two more shots, they saw two men approaching, each on horse-back.

"Hullo!" exclaimed Ned, "if here aren't two of our trapper friends!"

"Well, gentlemen, what luck?" asked one of them, as they drew near.

"The very best," replied Dad. "This is the most wonderful goose ground I could ever imagine. We've just shot and shot to our hearts' content, shot thousands of them. Didn't you hear us banging away!"

"Your shooting-irons must be air-guns," said one of the men with a grin, "because you're dreadful quiet about it, or else the geese drowned you out! But where's your game?"

"Right in here," said Ned, showing his leather carrying-case full of holders.

"That doesn't look as though it would hold half a goose," said the other man. "But if you've got so many, when you get them cooked, don't forget to send me down a few."

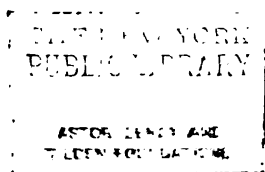
"All right," said Dad, "we certainly will."

"We saw you chasing the geese afoot," said the first speaker, "but it's no use to do that. The way to do it is to go horseback. They'll let you a heap nearer that way. If any of you want to try, you can take these horses now. We'll wait here and see how you make out."

Since Ned and Dad had the reflecting cameras, it was soon decided that they should make the try. The trappers got off and helped them to mount with their cameras, and they were off towards the nearest flock. Though the marsh was not so very wet, at



"HULLO!" EXCLAIMED NEG, "IF HERE AREN'T TWO OF OUR TRAPPER FRIENDS."
(Trappers and Geese on the Great Marsh, from photographs.)



the same time a horse sinks in more than a man, and these horses floundered along rather laboriously, after stopping and trying to turn back.

"These pesky horses won't half try for us," remarked Ned. "Come, get up there!" he exclaimed, slapping the animal's neck with the reins.

"That's just about the size of it," said Dad. "They know we're strangers, and don't care whether school keeps or not."

By dint of a lot of urging they managed to force the creatures along. Possibly it was all this extra fuss that alarmed the geese, but, anyhow, they flew off when the riders were quite a distance away. But even so they were able to get some sort of pictures of the geese, small in the distance, rising from the marsh. They were better pictures, too, for being taken from further above the ground than when they stood down in the grass.

After chasing another flock, with about the same result, they returned and surrendered the horses, taking pictures of the trappers on their mounts. Then, bidding them good-by, they turned their backs upon the honking geese and started back for the boat.

"Well, boys," said Dad, "we've gone done it, as the saying is. The blue goose chase is over. We've found them, watched them, studied them, and probably are the first people in the world to get photographs of them from wild life. We've evidently got ahead of the scientists, and we'll be the

first ones to make known to the scientific world the real abundance of the blue goose and their main winter habitat. That's success and glory enough for anybody for one time. Come on, fellows, let's hustle home and tell the folks about it! "

"I'm with you on that," exclaimed Ned with enthusiasm. "We've done the whole thing up just slick, haven't we! "

CHAPTER XIX

THROUGH WATER AND FIRE

GLAD hearts and lively conversation made the two-mile tramp back to the landing-place seem as nothing, even though the rubber boots were hot and heavy, and the day's tramping had worn holes in their stockings and blistered their feet. It was a spell of summer weather. The mercury rose to 77° that day, and various bushes and trees were rapidly pushing forth their young leaves. It seemed almost too bad to be leaving this January spring and pushing back to where it would not overtake them again for four long months.

Back from the marsh, opposite the *Pintail*, on the edge of the dry land bordering marsh and creek, they found, as they approached, a group of people. Some men were engaged in making a pirogue in the old primitive fashion, by burning out the interior of a log. In a small fire two men were heating irons red-hot, and then were applying them to the smoking, sizzling wood, chipping and cutting as well, to hasten matters and to get rid of the charred wood. The cavity had become now quite large, and the outside also was quite well under way, being hewn into some

sort of shape. The craft was long and narrow, looking as though it would easily roll over, and would require much careful work to dig it out thin enough to be of light weight, without cutting through. Among others who were looking on, watching the work, was the boys' friend, Bert.

Bert and all the rest were eager to hear the result of the goose hunt, and for awhile there was quite a lively conversation. Each of the party contributed his share to the narrative and then, in turn, the boat-builders had to answer questions about their methods of work.

This done, the next thing was to get aboard and begin the homeward cruise. Bert accompanied them down to the shore, where they signaled for the tender to take them off. Right here, in the little creek lay two boats moored to the bank. One was a pirogue dugout, of the same sort as the one they had just seen being made.

"I wonder how it would seem to be in one," remarked Ned, as he examined it. "Does it paddle easy?"

"I'll take you out to the vessel in her," offered Bert, "and you can see for yourself. She's a regular water-witch, goes like a streak."

"Good work!" exclaimed Ned, "that'll just hit me. So-long there! I'll get aboard first and tell them you're coming."

"Are you sure it will hold two all right?" asked Dad.

"Sure it will," answered Bert, "on a calm day like this. Why, there isn't enough wind to ripple the water."

"All right, then," said Dad, "but be careful, and don't stand up or get to fooling."

So Ned got carefully aboard and sat on the thwart foreward, quite a big fellow, as Jim remarked, with his large camera and the leather case strapped over his shoulder. Then Bert took his place and paddled off down the rest of the creek and out into the Gulf. A party of brown pelicans which were resting on the water flopped off as they approached.

Up to this time the water had been very shallow and still as a pond. Now, as they passed out over the shallow flat into deeper water, they began to feel the long roll of the old Gulf swell more and more. The tender had just put off from the *Pintail* and was approaching them. The swells set the pirogue rolling, and Ned found that the act of balancing was a more difficult accomplishment than he had supposed. The harder he tried, the worse matters seemed to get. It was just one continual wobble from side to side. Every new swell, as it came along, would give them a violent roll, enough, now and then, to make them ship water. When they tried to tilt back the other way they were pretty apt

to overdo the matter, in their anxiety, and dip under on the other side. It was clear enough that the craft was overloaded, and, however it might do in the creeks through the marsh, was no good in open water.

Presently they took a worse lurch yet, and shipped a good deal of water. For the first time now Ned saw real danger to his fine camera and the precious plates bearing wonderful images of the geese. He wasn't fool enough to lose his head and stand up, but he hailed the engineer in the approaching tender in no uncertain terms.

"Come here, quick as you can!" he shouted. "Row like blazes! We're going to capsize, and I'll lose my camera and my pictures!"

The engineer needed no urging. He knew full well what ticklish craft these dugouts are, and had been afraid for them when he saw the boys putting out in one. Bending his back to the oars, he rowed toward them with all his might. It was well that he did. Ned was doing his best to balance, but at every lurch the wretched tub was shipping more and more water. She was half full, threatening every minute to go under, trembling on the brink, as it were, before her final plunge. The tender had almost reached them. Ned had taken off the carrier case from his back, and held it and the camera, one in each hand, ready to pass them over, the instant the tender came near.

Along with the tender came a swell. Just as she was coming within reach of the pirogue, the swell struck the unfortunate craft. She rolled her side under and went completely over, throwing the boys headlong into the water.

"Take them," screamed Ned, reaching out camera and case in either hand to the engineer. A quarter of a second more would have been too late, but, as it was, the engineer was there when he was most needed. He was just in time to seize the valuable baggage from Ned's hands on the fly, as Ned, with too great impetus to be checked, was soused into the water, and disappeared from view. Bert was in the same fix, only, having no weight to hold, he did not take so violent a header.

"Whew!" exclaimed Ned, as he appeared on the surface, and grasped the side of the tender, "I don't care if I am wet, as long as you got my stuff all right!"

"It was a mighty close call for it," said the engineer, as he helped Ned in over the side, and then Bert. "I should think this other boy would know better than to bring you out in such a craft. It isn't fit for two people anyway."

"It wasn't his fault," said Ned, standing up for his friend. "I really proposed it. But you can bet I'll know enough not to try it again. I won't go in for dugouts when I build a boat."

When Bert had got hold of his dugout, Ned took

the oars and they towed the water-logged thing to land, where they pulled it up and emptied it out. Bert was sorry enough for the trouble he had made, but Ned told him not to mind, and that he wouldn't lay it up against him. Dad and Jim were there, and, bidding Bert good-by, they pushed out, and this time reached the *Pintail* without accident.

Ned certainly had to take it now, and furnished sport for the company all that afternoon. It would take far too long to repeat all the jokes made at his expense. The first thing for him to do was to crawl out of his wet clothes into dry ones. Undressing was easy enough but how was one to dress when he had nothing to put on? The fact was that Ned had filled up his suitcase with plate-boxes and camera things, and had left nearly all his extra clothing back at the hotel, having no idea that for a few days' trip he would need any more. He was certainly an object of charity. Jim proposed taking up a collection for this destitute person, which was done. Each member of the party managed to dig out something in the way of dry clothing. The articles certainly did not match, and most of them were hardly a tailor-made fit, to say the least, especially the warden's pants. No one had an extra jacket, so, when he needed one, he had to wear his overcoat.

"Well, you are a guy, sure enough!" laughed Jim, as he looked him over. "Stand up there on deck and let me take your picture."

At first Ned objected, but he soon got over his false modesty, and Jim got what Dad called an intimate life-study of the rarest and queerest bird in Louisiana. The scientists of the party undertook to classify him, and after a long discussion, the best they could do was to locate him somewhere between the geese and the jays, though the minority report of the engineer, was for calling him a loon! Meanwhile, as soon as they had come aboard, the anchor had been hove up, and they headed back for the mouth of the Pass. Dinner had been prepared for them, and, when they had rigged Ned out, they all fell to work with a will.

A couple of hours brought them "inside," and, in these placid waters the stomach of the warden was glad, because there was no more swell to upset it. Late in the afternoon they had successfully bucked the tide, and were again in Vermilion Bay. By night they had crossed it, run through the passage into the smaller bay, and before dark were again comfortable in the familiar club-house. Everyone agreed that this was an appropriate occasion for another big feed, to celebrate their conquest of the geese and the success of the trip. The number of cooks was only equaled by the total membership of the party, but, for all that, how could they spoil the broth this time when the board on the table was now nailed on so securely! The affair was made the most brilliant of its kind on the whole trip, for it

included a programme of after-dinner speeches, each one of the company responding to a toast. To Dad, naturally, was assigned the subject—"The Blue Goose," which he made the basis of a learned and humorous essay on ornithology. Ned's toast was about "Deep Sea Diving in January," in reference to his explorations and discoveries at the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico, in which speech he charmed his auditors with vivid descriptions of the scenery of the underworld, almost making them envious over what they had missed. The inspector tackled the problem of "In the Soup, and the Way Out," and advocated modern methods in carpentry. Jim, rather against his will, was compelled to descant upon "The Confessions of a Dynamiter." "The Advantages of Inland Navigation" wrung from the warden the confession that the bounding billows were not exactly the element on which he could perform the most effective warden-service. "Gasolene as a Mosquito Antidote" gave the engineer a chance to spin yarns as to how the power had often saved him from being eaten alive in that wilderness of swarming vermin.

The boys begged hard for another day with the ducks in the familiar blind, and Dad was almost inclined to yield, and postpone for a day their return to Latin grammar and other equally breezy sports of the classroom. But the weather conditions were not promising. As they made merry, the drizzle of rain made itself heard, and it was still coming down

when they roused up early in the morning for an observation. Even the boys were not particularly struck on loafing at the club-house over another day, especially as they had already done so well on pictures of the ducks, so it was decided to push on.

By nine o'clock in the morning the rain stopped, so they disembarked, and headed back up the bay for the last stage of their voyage, which came pretty near being the end, as well, for them all of the voyage of life. Somehow that morning the engine was a little out of sorts. Now and then it would stop, and the engineer had to fuss with it to make it start up again. For a time it went better, and they got well out into the middle of the bay.

"I never liked the way this engine is built," remarked the engineer, as he was examining the machinery, trying to locate the cause of the frequent trouble. "There's one thing especially bad, that they've put the gasolene tank right here beside the engine. There's more free gasolene around than I like to see, and I reckon it's sprung a leak somewhere. I can't help it now, but, just the same, it has no business to be so close to the engine. Every time we stop I'm scared that the back explosions may set things afire."

The words were hardly out of his mouth when the engine stopped again and made another back explosion. Instantly there was a flash, and everything was ablaze. Machinery and gasolene tank were

wrapped in flame, which filled the whole after part of the cabin. Some engineers, under the circumstances, might have given up and rushed for the tender, leaving the vessel to its fate. Not so engineer Wallace. He was both a brave and a thoughtful fellow, and he had anticipated just such trouble as this, and had planned out a programme of just what he would do, should it ever happen. Without an instant's hesitation he reached his arm through the flame and turned off the gasolene. Then, as he pulled out a blanket from a bunk, he called for a bucket of water, which the inspector brought with a rush and soused over the fire. "Start the pump!" he shouted to the warden, as he threw the blanket over the engine, while the inspector had another one over the gasolene tank.

"Get out on deck, boys!" exclaimed Dad. "Bring your cameras and plates too. There's no room for us down here, and there's nothing we can do!"

The cameras were up forward, and in an instant they and the cases of plates were shoved out of the windows on deck, quickly followed by their owners. Dad rushed to the stern to haul the tender up forward, so that, if matters became hopeless, all hands could instantly embark. In coming from the cabin Jim showed his shrewdness. The life-preservers were stacked up overhead, and he had thought, as he went out through the window to grab one. Stand-

ing on the bow with Ned, he proceeded to fasten it in place under his arms, in readiness for being thrown out into the water by the explosion, if it came before Dad got the tender ready.

What a sensation it was, standing on the bow of the boat, with nothing they could do, expecting every instant to be blown up! Somehow they didn't feel frightened, perhaps because the thing happened so suddenly and they had to act so quickly that at first there was no time to stop to think about the danger.

Even now they had little time to think about it. Just as Dad got the tender alongside, the engineer stuck his head out of a window and announced — "Fire's all out!" Upon this glad news all rushed down below, and proceeded to heap congratulations upon the plucky engineer. Dad got out some vaseline from his packet of medicines to rub on the arm which had saved them, which was somewhat painfully, though not seriously scorched.

Everyone had so much praise for Wallace that he was quite abashed by it. Interesting as were all these nice words, those of the inspector were to him the most important of all.

"Young man," he said, putting his hand in friendly fashion on his shoulder, and looking him square in the eyes, "you're a wonder! If there were more men like you, our State service would be a lot better than it is. Louisiana needs men like you, and I'm glad you had the chance to show the

stuff you were made of. Probably you don't know, but I've been looking for a fellow of your kind. We're just getting a fine vessel to use in the fisheries service, and we hadn't chosen the chief engineer yet. But he's chosen now. You're the man for the position, if you'll take it. I suppose you won't object to being promoted?"

The young fellow was pretty nearly overwhelmed by this sudden turn of affairs, but he was able modestly to express his thanks and to say that if the inspector thought he knew enough, he would be proud to take the new position.

Further tinkering with the engine finally put it in shape to finish the voyage. Starting up again, they ran up the bay, and into the bayou, along past the familiar landscape. The sun came out, at length, and, as they went along, they took a few more pictures, among others of a flock of white domestic geese with the Southern plantation house and grounds behind it for a background. It made a very pretty picture, though it did not have the interest of the stirring scenes with the wild geese.

The last meal of the cruise was served on board, and by the middle of the afternoon they drew up to the wharf at Abbeville. Back at the hotel they proceeded to repack for the homeward journey, while Ned tried to finish the drying of his clothes. The rubber boots and corduroy suit, though, were a hard proposition, and he finally had to pack them damp.

They never dried till days after he reached home.

That evening the whole party took their last meal together at the hotel, and feasted on duck, quail, snipe, oysters, and other delicacies, done to a turn after the approved methods of French cooking, of which the chef of the little hotel was a past master.

"If any of us, or our friends, ever come down here again, we certainly shall know where to stop," Dad told the hotel keeper in the most cordial manner. "And such prices too! Fifty cents for a meal the like of which in New York would have cost anywhere from five to ten dollars."

Around town the news had spread like the gasoline blaze itself, of Wallace's exploit and promotion. People thronged to see him, until, unused to such publicity, the modest young fellow skipped off by the back door home to bed.

Next morning, shortly after ten o'clock, bidding good-by to their friends and the companions of the trip, they started off on the long railway journey. It took till early evening to reach New Orleans, just in time to transfer to another depot and get the train for New York.

This time they took a different route, to see new country, "the Queen and Crescent,"—up through Louisiana and Northern Mississippi, and across the Tennessee. In general the scenery was prettier than by the other line. Tennessee proved to be a pleas-

ant hilly country, looking much like parts of New England. Next they swung through Virginia, and in due time had returned to their former route, from Washington and on.

The second morning they were in New York, and by afternoon were safe at home. Here began forthwith an eager narration to family, friends, and companions at school of their adventures and experiences, the freshness of which did not wear off for many a long day.

The developing of the negatives was almost as exciting as the trip itself. All worked together in Dad's darkroom. Under intense excitement, and with animated remarks, they saw flash out and develop up finely, batch by batch, the images of geese, ducks, shore-birds, the egret, the pelicans, the black-birds, and many a familiar scene. That darkroom, black as night, save for the dull glow of the ruby lamp, was a regular fairyland of wonder and surprise,—the most interesting place in Connecticut, as Ned put it.

"O glory!" ejaculated Ned, "here's the big flock of geese, the first crack at them we had down the Delta. Look at them, strung clear across the plate, as sharp and good as anyone could ask!"

"Say, just look at this, boys," cried Dad, as much excited as any boy could be, "here's a wonder for you, the big flock of pintails that came in to the decoy's on New Year's Day, a plate full of ducks. See

them come! Why, it's just as real as when we were watching them flying towards us, and clutching our cameras ready for the shot. I believe it's a duck picture that hasn't ever been beaten! Look how fine and clear their wings show up, and how large they are! It'll make a grand enlargement to frame."

Every new success called out more delighted exclamations. It took "séances" of a number of days' duration to develop all the hundreds of plates. When the last image had flashed out and been fixed permanently in the hypo bath, the boys, instead of being tired of this, wished they had it to do all over again, or had taken more. But they had other instalments of fun in making prints from slides, to show to gatherings of admiring friends,—yes, and bromide enlargements of the most striking ones, to be nicely tinted, and then framed and hung in their rooms and elsewhere in the house, or presented to friends who could appreciate the artistic and sporting value of such splendid trophies of a rare hunt as these were.

Dad also worked up his material, pictorial and literary, and soon had a striking article published in one of the leading magazines, in which the discovery was announced of the winter habitat of the blue goose, and the first photographs of the species from life that had ever been taken were given to the world. Two months and a half later there came out, in a

scientific journal, the belated account by a government scientist of an exploration of the very same regions as had been so thoroughly covered by the other party over a month earlier, confirming everything that they had seen, but too late to win from them the laurels of discovery.

Aside from the scientific results, the boys had enjoyed the greatest fun of their lives, and obtained experiences in true sportsmanship, manly adventure, self-reliance, and general physical development which made the trip of immense value to them, a real turning-point in their careers. They now knew to the full the delight of the new sport of hunting wild creatures with the camera instead of the gun. Never would they care for the killing of game when this far more delightful field of sport had been opened to them. Without directly trying to be such, they were among the other boys genuine missionaries. Through them a number of their friends learned the better way, and in their school it became most unpopular to take the lives of birds or animals, or to cause suffering to any living creature.

When Dad came to count up, on the one hand the money cost of the expedition, and on the other hand, besides the personal pleasure and profit to him, the gain to his own boy and to the son of his friend, as well as their good influence over the other boys of the town through what they had learned and done, he decided that it was the best investment he had ever

made in his life, and resolved to invest more capital from time to time, in so profitable an industry which paid such large dividends.

Whenever father and son talked together of this expedition, of other possible ones in the future, there shone in the boy's eyes a wealth of gratitude, of joy, of the happy longing and anticipation, that came in response to no other call. Better even than the discovery and successful pursuit of the blue goose was another discovery, which Ned made, such as would be worth a fortune to many a boy, that his Dad was his best and dearest chum.

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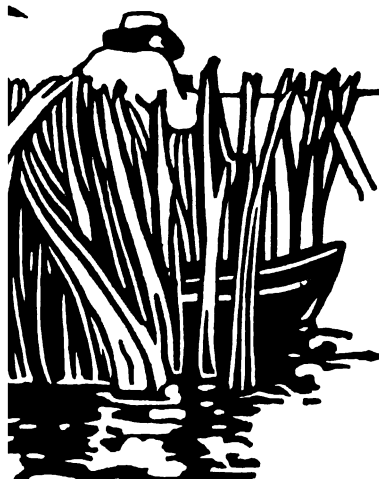
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THE BLUE GOOSE CHASE



FRANK J.

